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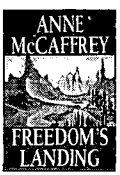

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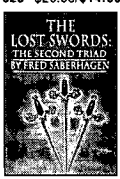

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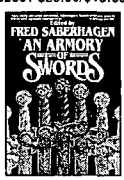

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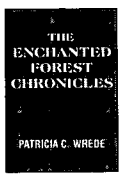

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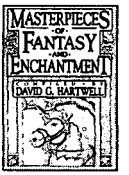

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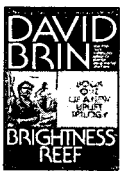

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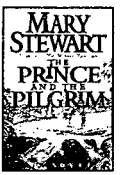

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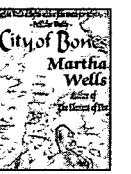

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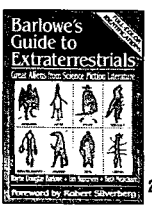

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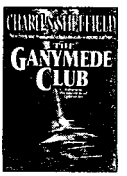

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

SOMETIMES events reappear, as vivid as they were when they happened. A memory assaulted me while I watched the NBC *Nightly News* last week. The top story was the Blizzard of '96: the East Coast blanketed in snow, the business of government at a standstill, and the streets of New York City empty. I saw this same news footage in January of 1977, only then I had a fever of 103 degrees, and I was sicker than I had been before or after.

I had mononucleosis. The disease made its appearance one Thursday evening when I literally collapsed in a friend's arms. For the next six weeks, I couldn't get off the couch. The doctor threatened to hospitalize me; my mother insisted on caring for me at home. The five o'clock news punctuated my days, and somehow those snowbound people on the distant and imaginary East Coast became my colleagues in enforced imprisonment. The snow kept them in; the disease kept me in. They lost wages; I lost weight. They were too cold; I was too hot, burning with a fever that made me lightheaded and weak.

I didn't know how those weather shut-ins spent their time. Many were without power. I supposed they huddled in blankets and read. I did the same. I couldn't watch television or walk around. But somehow I could read without making myself dizzy. That year, my sister gave me *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* for Christmas. I read them while I was delirious, and it was an experience unlike any other.

The world of the books became my world. Bilbo spoke to me in my dreams. Gandalf hobbled through the living room, pausing to examine the workmanship in the blue and brown afghan my grandmother had made. Gollum lisped from the windows, his words unintelligible through the glass.

They were my friends, my confidants, my reason for being all during the fever and the long recovery. I was on my second reading of the whole

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set when I finally returned to school, *The Return of the King* in my hands.

And there I learned that I was reading garbage.

I don't remember who told me, except that it was someone in authority. Someone who told me that Tolkien had stolen from a variety of literary traditions to create his unoriginal novels. If I was going to read that type of literature, I should read the greats: Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* or Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

I put *The Return of the King* in my purse, thus beginning a long habit of carrying purses large enough to hold at least one paperback. I removed the book only when I could hide it in a textbook, and never let anyone see what I read for pleasure again.

Many people hide what they read. On airlines, I have seen businessmen wrap a *Star Trek* novel in a copy of *Fortune*. Women in restaurants fold the cover of their novel back so no one can see it. Children learn early to hide their books inside another. Just the other day, I saw an eight-year-old sitting on the floor of the local bookstore, reading. He had covered his copy of the current *Goosebumps* novel with a copy of *Wind in the Willows*. I wouldn't have noticed his deception if I hadn't been standing behind him when he did it.

Guilty pleasures. They're the books we hide, the books we keep in a drawer or in the back of a closet. They're the books we never admit we've read unless someone else admits they've read them — and enjoyed them — first.

Guilty pleasures. They're the books your parents forbid, your spouse laughs at, and literary critics bemoan. They're the books we squander our money on, waste our time with, and rot our minds reading.

Guilty pleasures. They're the books we enjoy.

For if we didn't, we wouldn't go to all the trouble to read them. We wouldn't hide them, or defend them, or spend our money on them.

I've been discussing guilty pleasures in one way or another in this space for the last year, wondering what I could do to promote them. Then Michelle West contacted me. She offered to review books that never get reviewed. And she wanted to call the column "Guilty Pleasures."

How perfect, I thought. We can't win this battle against the "Thou Should Not" police without a bit of ammunition. Articles, editorials, and reviews will help. So will reading the books out in the open, without the covers bent back, without hiding them in some other publication, without apology.

Michelle's first column is in this

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issue. She can't cover everyone's guilty pleasures, so she only reviews her own. She has promised me she will review media tie-ins, fat fantasy novels (hmmm, like *The Lord of the Rings*!), and anything else the Guardians of Right Thinking pooh-pooh. Her column will appear about three or four times a year — not because there are so few guilty pleasures (there are too many to cover) but because we want to save room for the short fiction that is this magazine's reason for being.

After all, today's most acclaimed short story writer might become the author of tomorrow's guilty pleasure.

I was healthy during the Blizzard of '96. Instead of being confined to the couch, I was far from home, teaching a weekend writing course at a university that disapproved of showing an R-rated movie as an example of the proper way to plot. This time, instead of hiding the movie or acquiesing, it became optional — people could attend that section of the class if they wanted to. And that's probably the best way to handle this sort of disapproval.

You can read the column on guilty pleasures if you want to. It's optional. But I hope you do read it, just like I hope you sample some of the books Michelle recommends.

After all, the only thing better than reading a guilty pleasure is sharing one.

"My people know them as 'shapeshifters.' You call them 'attorneys.'"

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If you attend one of the many science fiction conventions around the nation, you'll hear editors beg for hard science fiction stories. Or off-world science fiction stories. Or even science fiction stories set on the good old Moon.

New writer Astrid Julian manages to make the Moon and the hard science fiction story fresh. "Blow-up" is her first sale to F&SF. *She has also sold stories to* Interzone, Writers of the Future, *and* Xanadu 3.

Blowup

By Astrid Julian

Lyrics for "The View from the Moon" by Geoffrey A. Landis

"*SIEG HEIL!*" IT BURST OUT of Charlotte before she could stop herself. She felt her cheeks warm as she looked at the TV-watching faces in the room about her and realized she'd just insulted the musical tastes of most of them.

The video panned across the thousands of screaming faces in the stadium. Fans swaying back and forth to the music, their hands raised, resembled the fanatics of another age just as eager to follow the lead of a single man.

Lyrics from Jimmy St. August's latest hit thudded through the TV speakers. The voice of the stadium mob became a dark echo that sang along.

"In dirty crowded tenements we huddle here like rats
The plaster's stained and shattered, with wind blowing through the slats
While they shoot our hard-earned dollars to the Moon
And from the Moon our problems all seem small

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They don't see the filth, the vagrants passed out in the hall
Looking down, they can't see us at all

The Moon is cold and cruel and has never been alive
And they speak of evolution, that only the strong survive
They dream of butterflies, in titanium cocoons
And from the Moon the damage looks so small
They can't see the weeds and rubble where forests once grew tall
Looking down they can't see us at all"

It was sickening to watch the fans reach forward to touch Jimmy St. August, or his pant leg, or his shoe, or whatever else they could grab when he danced out to the edge of the stage.

The camera angle cut back to St. August alone, filling the TV screen of the conference room with his face. Charlotte Glass was repulsed at how St. August mesmerized the professionals gathered around the table. The various scientists and administrators were supposed to spend the next week guiding the Presidential Commission through Moon Station, not collecting St. August autographs.

Black foam padding from the microphone obscured St. August's mouth. Only his eyes, dark and intense, stared back out through the glass.

"Really, Charlotte," said a round-faced man wearing a wrinkled blue and green plaid shirt. "He's not Hitler."

Michael Carter *would* defend the video, Charlotte thought.

"He means well," Carter added.

He saw only jubilation as the Greens celebrated the closing of the Blind River nuclear power plant on Lake Huron, the last nuclear power plant in North America. Wasn't he listening to the lyrics they were singing? Carter was such a science nerd, too absorbed in his work to take in what this band of fun-loving environmentalists had in mind for Moon Station. She would spell it out to him later.

"Sorry. A mob always brings out the worst in me." No matter how innocent St. August's lyrics sounded with their appeals for world peace and for sharing world resources, the sexual throb of his guitar was a cry for power. Raw power. Corrupt power. Couldn't they see how he savored playing Jesus to the masses? It was so obvious, they shouldn't be able to miss it. But then,

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none of the rest of them had gone to high school with rock superstar Jimmy St. August.

Time to get out of here, before she told them what she really thought of their hero. "Look, I've got to pick up some ice samples on my way back to Station, so I'm going to ride a scooter out," Charlotte told them. "I'll see you all out at the landing crater."

The crescent Earth with its polluting billions plunged an angry talon into the clean, black, star-encrusted sky at the edge of the horizon. Charlotte Glass slammed the golden visor down over her faceplate and shoved the scooter into gear. Jimmy St. August, bad-boy fuck-up of Lakewood High School Class of 2023, was coming to the Moon.

It wasn't fair.

She'd spent twelve years of her life cooking up exotic metal alloys in stuffy labs; crawling around inside volcanic fumaroles, her nose bleeding from the sulfuric steam seeping into her mask; and puking her guts out almost every morning for six weeks at Johnson during her months of astronaut training. What had he ever done to earn himself a trip to the Moon? Write a couple of gold records slamming NASA. Records that caught the eye of a president who believed the great truths of the world could be captured in a rock-n-roll lyric. Jimmy St. August, who'd spent his whole senior year so stoned on acid and frost that it was the shock of the summer to see him lope across the stage, shit-eating grin on his face, to pick up his diploma from the high school principal. That same Jimmy St. August had gotten himself named to a presidential commission to investigate bureaucratic waste at NASA. And at the top of his hit list was Moon Science Station. Charlotte's life work was about to be shut down by a man with a guitar.

But not before he got a free trip to the Moon out of the deal. She turned up the throttle on the scooter and sped up the ramp leading out of the vehicle storage hangar. The scooter shot off the ribbed concrete and landed softly in the powdery regolith surrounding Station.

Would St. August remember her? Probably not. Her math teacher had made her spend a semester coaching St. August through quadratic equations during her sophomore year, but her boobs hadn't been big enough nor her jeans tight enough for Jimmy St. August to notice her. He had a half a brain, when he managed to keep awake, but she still couldn't understand why the

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teachers had cut him slack. Everybody's golden boy. Why hadn't they been able to see how lazy he was?

He'd gone on from winning over teachers and seducing half the girls at Lakewood High, to advising presidents and enticing half the human race into buying his albums.

Well, if Biankowski ordered it, she had to show up at the landing crater to be part of the welcoming committee, but she didn't have to sit with the Presidential Commission on Space Exploration during the half-hour trip back to Station on the shuttle.

The scooter wheeled silently around the secondary equipment hangars and up the small hill where the solar collectors stood. A large stone caught the front wheel of the scooter, twisting it sideways and bouncing it back down the path. Several seconds passed before Charlotte realized it was a moonquake that had caused her to slide back down. A big one. They weren't really dangerous with the Moon's crust so stable, more of a nuisance really, but for some reason they seemed to be increasing in frequency. Just what they needed with a commission on the loose.

The official tour was scheduled for eight the next morning. Soon enough to socialize with the Green coyotes lining up to devour Moon Station. She smiled to herself. St. August wouldn't be able to get his ass out of bed that early anyway.

At the top of the hill the scooter spun too sharply, missing the path. A plume of regolith shot up, spraying a light coating of dust onto the solar arrays facing the vehicle service bays. Good. Cleaning the powder off again would give the rookies something to do. And the Presidential Commission would have a chance to see the spaceteam in action.

God, she was in a foul mood. A spin around Station perimeter would help her cool off long enough to play hostess and shepherd the high-mucky-mucks and assorted high-rollers onto the shuttle. Then she would be able to get back to the office and go over the latest assays with Carter before supper. They were onto something. Something big. The last bit of ice she'd brought out of the fault line two kilometers east of the volcano had been streaked with trace amounts of methane and carbon.

Charlotte pressed the clutch, downshifting the scooter and easing it onto the maintenance path that followed the volcanic rille leading out to the landing crater. In a few places the lava shell covering the rille remained intact,

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but for most of the ride, if she stayed very close to the edge, she could catch the glint of the shuttle rail in the darkness below.

At the end of the line the scooter skidded out onto the parking pad. She counterwheeled into the direction of the spin to control the skid back onto concrete, then climbed off the scooter and headed to the air lock. The outer door, at the base of the landing crater wall, slid open as she approached. Inside she punched the controls and waited for the inner door to open.

A lock technician was waiting at the top of the staircase to help slip off her helmet. She shook her short brown curls free and turned off the climate conditioning on her hard suit's front.

"They landed about fifteen minutes ago," he told her. "We're still hooking up the pressure sleeve to bring the commissioners in at gate two. Boss wants to see you in the shuttle offices before they offload."

"Thanks." What could Biankowski want now? Charlotte walked through the man-made catacombs under the launch crater. The warehouses on her right ringed the outer perimeter. On her left were the ice makers. The launch tubes, which couldn't be seen from the outer corridor, formed a five-pointed star at the center of the crater where the big laser was. That way the laser could be swiveled around to burn ice in any one of the tubes. The meter-wide slab of water ice that would fuel the return of the lunar lander had just finished freezing. Technicians were rolling it onto a conveyor and walking it toward the crater center. White frost chilled the air as she passed the ice. The slab would be loaded into the bottom of one of the refrigerated launch tubes. After the commission had disembarked, the lander itself would be guided into the launch tube through a surface hatchway, then lowered down onto the ice slab.

The glass doors to the shuttle offices stood open. Stan Biankowski, a smallish, blond man with gold wire-rimmed glasses, sat at one of the computer terminals and pointed out something on the screen to an assistant. He looked up when he heard her footsteps, frowning when he saw the pressure suit.

"Ah, Glass, you're here. Good. Look, a static discharge near one of the transmission lines from the nuclear generator has knocked out a relay somewhere. We haven't figured out if a moonquake ripped a grounding cable loose or what. Anyway it's nothing serious, but with night beginning, there could be periodic brown-outs. I don't have to tell you, we don't need this with a presidential commission here. We should be able to get the shuttle back to

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Station on battery alone, but it'll be a slow ride. I need you to distract them..."

She wasn't ready for this. "But sir, I drove a scooter out here."

"You can pick it up again tomorrow. Look, I know this is awkward for you. Carter told me you went to high school with this St. August fellow and that you're not overly fond of him, but it can't be helped. I have to stay on top of this problem..."

She felt herself blush. "I could supervise things here for you, sir."

Biankowski ignored her, raising his voice slightly. "And since you're leading the volcano tour tomorrow anyway, it will be less noticeable that I'm not on the shuttle if you take over. The fact that you know one of these commissioners personally, however slightly, could be an enormous asset to Station. Don't blow it, Glass."

"Yes sir."

"Now let's get out there and greet our guests."

THERE WERE twenty-one of them. Three were camera crew and not actually part of the commission. The two women, one Ghanian, one Brazilian, wore the blue berets of UN resource allocation officers. Their membership on the commission was required by international law. Four were United States Senators. The Germans and the Japanese, major financial backers of Moon Station, had sent their Ministers of Technologic Research. The three men in expensive suits represented a consortium of American business concerns. NASA itself had sent a senior administrator and an ancient astronaut left over from the early days of Mars exploration. The remaining four wore the black of clergymen of various denominations. Charlotte would have been inclined to see them as part of the problem, what with the ever-increasing recriminalization of both abortion and birth control on Earth, but they seemed to be playing an expanding role on governmental bodies of all types. Cardinal Alfonso Romero from Los Angeles chatted amiably with St. August.

St. August wore the uniform of the lay members of the commission — the expensive beige Italian suit and tie — though his was lightweight wool, not silk. No doubt because silk manufacture involved the death of living creatures. What had happened to the rock-and-rollers who had wanted to rock and shock the world? Nowadays they seemed only to want to clean it up. Or at least they wanted their fans to do it for them. It wouldn't have surprised

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her to hear St. August had flown his own Lear to the launch facility in Florida. Just as long as the ordinary, the little people, didn't waste precious energy or resources that should be shared with the third world.

His appearance didn't totally conform to the commission, though. Lush dark brown hair curled over his shoulders and down onto his pink shirt; and his lilac tie sported a button emblazoned with the slogan, "Nuke the scientists." A slogan no doubt intended to rebuke Moon Station's inhabitants, and to call attention to the fans back on Earth, in case they missed it, that it wouldn't be possible to live on Moon Station without power from the small nuclear generator beyond the vehicle hangars. And Biankowski thought she would have some sway with this guy? The welcoming formalities consisted mainly of assigning a Station-side buddy to accompany commission members for the next day or so, while they acquired their moonlegs. Even with five-meter-high ceilings in the corridors, more than one careless visitor had managed to crack his skull bouncing through Station at one-sixth the Earth's gravity. St. August excused himself to the Cardinal and walked toward her. "Charlotte," he said. "That is you, isn't it?" Someone had coached him. He couldn't possibly remember. Well, it wouldn't work. She kept her face stern as she shook hands. She refused to look up at the green eyes. "Shy as ever, I see," St. August said, as he bent closer forcing her to look into his face. The tiny lines and crow's feet made him seem friendlier. Where his youthful face had been marred by childish self-absorption, his adult face intrigued. Then she spotted Biankowski smiling. He was watching her, shifting his gaze from St. August back to herself. By the time she figured out what he had in mind, and before she could introduce herself to one of the other commissioners, she found herself assigned to buddy up with St. August. So now she didn't just have to conduct the volcano tour tomorrow, she had to babysit him the whole damn week as well.

Charlotte stood at the front of the shuttle car after all the commissioners and their moonside buddies had been seated. "Please keep your seatbelts fastened," she told them. "G-forces on the shuttle are weak, but new arrivals from Earth have a tendency to overreact and could be hurt."

St. August sat in the aisle seat just in front of where she stood. She felt his eyes looking up at her as she spoke. They seemed to see through her, like his blind TV-eyes in that slick commercial where he looked up out of the TV

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after sharing his bowl of rice with a Nigerian AIDS-orphan. Or the one where he sang along with the Panterrans from inside a gigantic glass box on the shores of Lake Karachai; Kazakh horsemen churning the radioactive dust of the shoreline into a cloud that gradually obscurred the box and St. August's face. All the while his eyes stared at you, filling with tears, daring you to care about the world as much as he did. Big phony! Those celluloid tears were just another way to line his pockets.

What was he thinking now? If he could bring his fans here, she had no doubt they would dismantle Station in hours. Too bad all that power couldn't be channeled into bringing something useful to the Moon. Like the millions of tourist dollars Elvis fans brought to Memphis every year on their pilgrimages to Graceland.

St. August's jawline was strong, but not overbearing. The rock-and roll idol needed a shave. Stubble on his cheeks made him seem more of an ordinary man, fragile even. Maybe he would be gracious enough to have a heart attack while on Station. Dream on. He was too young and healthy. Maybe he would o.d. on...what was that drug's name? Splinters. Yeah, that was it...ice splinters. Then Station would get five or ten dollars from millions of fans for a St. August Memorial, and any future presidential commissions could put their white papers where the sun don't shine. Yeah, St. August could do a lot for Station, if he would be considerate enough to die there.

He was still staring at her. Why didn't he look away? She had to force herself to think of something besides him. The tour maybe, Charlotte? She was supposed to narrate it! "The shuttle rail is housed inside a volcanic rille formed by a jet of hot gases ejected from underneath the lava flow. L-l-like blowing up a balloon." God, he was making her nervous. She had to make him look away.

"If you look out the shuttle windows at the rille walls, you'll see that they are very smooth and glassy. This type of lava is called pahoehoe." The shuttle jerked, then cut its speed. Biankowski's threatened brown-out. "We're going to slow the shuttle down now, so you can have a better look. I always think it looks like satin." Think fast, Charlotte, she told herself. Keep them interested until the shuttle accelerates again.

"The basalt forming this rille is called kimberlite. It actually formed about 200 kilometers underground, then forced its way up in a kind of gaseous explosion. Kimberlite is studded with diamonds, so if you see a bright flash

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of light reflecting back at you from the dark blue walls, it might even be a diamond." It seemed to be working. The commissioners were all looking out the windows. Even some of the Station personnel were looking. Not St. August. His left hand fingered the chords of a song only he could hear. His eyes never left her pressure suit, as if he were committing every velcro tab and instrument gauge to memory. She wished she'd worn something else. Damn that Biankowski.

"W-w-we don't recommend d-diamond hunting inside the rille however. Not only is the shuttle apt to run you over, but the lava that has fallen from up above has fractured into very sharp shards. Walking over them is dangerous even in a hard suit." Cardinal Romero, who sat behind St. August, tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and they both looked out the window. Finally. Charlotte reached for the climate controls on her sleeve and turned on the unit's AC.

St. August's hand gripped the back of the seat in front of the Cardinal. The fingers were thick and strong, not what she expected a musician's hand to look like. His mouth seemed soft. More sensitive than she remembered. She watched it form a mysterious pout in response to something the Cardinal said. The Cardinal shook his head and laughed. St. August smiled, and said something which made the Cardinal laugh even harder. She was alarmed to find herself wishing she were close enough to overhear their conversation.

St. August's green eyes looked straight into hers. She'd been staring at him and he'd caught her. Smile, Charlotte. Smile. It's safer than suddenly looking away. Don't let him know he's getting to you.

Come on. Speed up the damn shuttle. How long could the brown-out last with Biankowski sitting right there reassigning Station power allocations? Start up the tour again, Charlotte. Don't let him talk to you.

"You never know," Charlotte spoke into her microphone. "You might find diamonds lying in the dust when you take a walk through the Station perimeter. It has happened."

Someone in the back of the car raised a hand. Good, a question. Get her mind on something else.

"Dr. Glass, where is the volcano in relation to the station?"

The shuttle lurched forward with a sudden surge of speed. Charlotte lost her balance and grabbed the support bar next to the aisle. St. August put his hand over hers to make sure she didn't lose her grip. The hard, guitar-string

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calluses of his fingertips brushed against the back of her hand. She jerked her hand away. Too quickly, you idiot. Don't let him know he's affecting you like this. You and about ten million other women. *Sieg Heil!*

She straightened, her body adjusting to the increase in speed. "This rille runs parallel to the shoreline of the Humboldt Sea, which lies about forty klicks to the east. We do most of our heavy-metals mining there. If you run a perpendicular line from the rille to the Sea, you'll hit the volcano twenty klicks out. Station was actually built inside a small impact crater to cut down on the amount of excavation necessary. The volcano wasn't found until Station was almost complete, when it was too late to relocate without wasting the billions of dollars that had already been spent."

She looked down at St. August to make sure he didn't miss the point. If the early settlers had been allowed to use seismic tomography to decide where to place Station, it might all have been avoided, but the Greens had exerted pressure on world governments and on the UN to ban the importation of large explosives to the Moon.

"But hasn't having the volcano so near turned out to be an advantage?" St. August asked. "I mean, after all, the volcano is extinct, and haven't you found traces of ammonia and other useful ices down there?"

So he'd done some homework. That was new. "Yes. And occasionally we find a small pockets of clathrates in the permanight fissures." Blank looks greeted her comment so she went on to explain. "Clathrates are tiny cages of water molecules with organic molecules inside them. Methane, ammonia...if we could find enough of them, we'd have enough nitrogen to make Station biologically self-sufficient."

The shuttle pulled into Station. Thank God, Charlotte thought. St. August stood next to her. If she looked up slightly, she found herself looking at his lips. His soft lips. She looked down quickly, but couldn't stop herself from wondering what it would be like to touch them with her fingers. He bent down to speak into her ear. "Cute outfit."

"What, this old thing?" She played the game, but she was seething inside. How dare he? With his index finger, he brushed away moondust from one of the pressure gauges on her shoulder. He lifted his finger to his nose to smell the moondust, then tasted it with his tongue. Couldn't argue with his instincts. If he'd bothered to work during high school, he might even have made a decent lab tech.

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"As long as we're straightening up each other's clothing..." She unfastened his "Nuke the scientists" button and put it inside his jacket pocket. "Scientists have feelings too, you know."

"It was meant to be funny."

"It's not."

The shuttle door slid open.

THERE'D BEEN ANOTHER QUAKE during the night. Biankowski was growing increasingly suspicious that the quakes and the power outages were connected somehow and was anxious to get the commission out of Station so he could conduct more extensive tests. By the time Charlotte arrived at the shuttle terminal that morning, most of the commission members had already assembled. She had pleaded illness the evening before and asked Carter to fill in with St. August, but she'd spent the whole evening thinking about him anyway.

Artificial dawn flickered in from the slowly opening reflector reservoirs in the ceiling. Orange sodium light from windows and balconies in the apartments across from the terminal faded into the whitish daylight. The dark outlines of the tree tops softened, blurring into daylight green at their edges.

Dozens of St. August fans waited at the shuttle terminal. Those who hadn't been able to come last night because of work were here now. Charlotte grimaced as she watched them line up, CDs in hand.

Lanie Graham, Station's doctor, stood at the coffee bar of the small terminal restaurant waiting for Charlotte. She handed Charlotte two small envelopes, one blue and one yellow, each filled with metabolic regulators to help the commissioners adjust to the long lunar night. "Start them on the first yellow tablet after lunch. Food will help absorb the first jolt of the day-stims. The blue tablets at bedtime."

"Thanks." Charlotte put the envelopes in her breast pocket and refastened the velcro tabs.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I've got an autograph to collect," Lanie said as she picked up a CD from the counter.

Charlotte winced. "Not you too, Lanie. I thought you'd have more sense than to let all this Hollywood bullshit get to you."

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The doctor smiled. Was it a sad smile, or was Charlotte just imagining it? "You could stand to lighten up a little, Charlotte. Life is too short to be so serious all the time. Right about now, I'm wishing I'd studied geology instead of medicine."

"Well, maybe he'll get sick on the tour and I'll send him back into your clutches and you can have your way with him. Or you could go over his medical records, he might have missed a shot or something. Houston has been getting a little lax about these things."

Lanie laughed. "You're not heading for an execution. It wouldn't hurt for you to look like you're enjoying yourself just a little. Some makeup might help too."

"Right. And it'll start running down my face inside my helmet and when I lift my visor, he'll scream with fright and I'll have to send him to sick bay and he'll be too incoherent to make any kind of recommendation whatsoever to his buddy the President. It's a good plan. I like it."

Lanie laughed again. Someone walked up behind Charlotte. She knew it was Jimmy St. August before he spoke. She could see the excitement in Lanie's face. He was close enough that she could feel the warmth of his body on her back, close enough that she could smell his soap.

"Good morning, ladies," he said.

Charlotte stepped to the side, next to Lanie and away from him, before she turned around and greeted him. As he shook her hand, she was conscious of how small and cold her hand must feel in his large warm one. He was holding it too long. Damn him! What would Lanie think? She tried to pull her hand away, but he held onto it. "Wait! Just a minute." He pulled her hand up close to his face, forcing her to look at him. The tone of his voice changed. "I don't bite, you know."

She jerked her hand again. This time he let it go. "No, seriously, wait! I have a message for you from Carter," he said, before she could turn. "You forgot to turn on your machine last night."

"Yes?"

"He said when you get done playing tour guide out on the surface outside Station, you might want to take everyone straight to the volcano instead of out to the Sea. He's found something he thinks the commission will be real interested in."

"Thank you," Charlotte said sharply. She excused herself to check with the various engineers and technicians responsible for VIP-tour ops. St. August

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signed autographs. Every so often she would look up and see him. How the muscles of his forearm flexed as he wrote, how the veins on his temple stood out when he shook his hair back out of his face, how easily he laughed with the women and the occasional man waiting for his signature. She should have worn makeup so he would notice her more. No, no, no. He was the enemy. He despised everything she stood for.

Two tracked busses, each seating fifteen, crawled up onto the shuttle platform. Charlotte waited at the door to the first bus while the commission members were briefed on the functions of their pressure suits. The crawlers were pressurized, but the volcano wasn't.

The busses crept part way up the solar collector hill to give the commissioners their first good view of Station, since the shuttle was primarily an underground conveyance. Charlotte sat alone at the back of the first bus and let the driver do the talking. He'd guided a tour often enough. Half of the morning was over when St. August made his way to the back to sit on the seat next to hers.

She didn't bother with the formalities of greeting. "You should stay in front. You can have a better look at what you're shutting down."

His mouth twisted slightly, a flinch, barely perceptible. She'd hurt him. Well, what did he expect? "We haven't decided to go that far," he said. "Not yet."

"No, but you will. Let's see, the report will read, 'The nations of the North, in using a substantial amount of the Gross World Product to fund Moon Science Station, exhibit a callous disregard for the needs of the Peoples of the Southern Hemisphere,' blah, blah blah..."

He crossed his arms and pulled himself into the corner, away from her. A half-smile hovered on his lips as he shook his head. "I doubt it will be that bad. Maybe a little scaling back, that's all."

"Maybe the Peoples of the South should scale back their populations a bit."

His smile grew sad. The sadness crept up into his eyes. He really did care. In spite of his methods. How could she be physically so attracted to someone she found so repugnant spiritually?

"What right have we to interfere in the cultural proclivities of other nations?" he asked.

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"We pay their bills, that's what right. That's more than the churches of Earth do for the starving little ones their parishioners keep bringing into the world."

"We also exploit their resources at ridiculously low prices. And churches give people hope for a better tomorrow."

"Superstitions don't feed people or eliminate smallpox. Science does."

"How do you know that prayers don't help scientists find the solutions?"

She didn't answer. What was the point? He would have the last word anyway. With millions of fans. And with the President.

Why couldn't he understand that the space program was seed money? Enough churches were willing to take the credit, but it was technology that was actually feeding the developing world's starving, damn it. Technology, not an enlightened moral status, made it possible for the developed world to share. What could the poor share except their poverty?

The busses had left Station far behind and were heading for the volcano before the afternoon tour of the mines on the Humboldt Sea. The crawler poked along, but she felt no compulsion to keep the commission members entertained the way she had the previous day. Let Biankowski worry about it.

An alarm beeped near the front of the bus. It paused, then beeped again. She excused herself to St. August, plugged in an earphone and toggled on the private channel she and the drivers shared. "What's happening?"

"Protons detectors are going crazy. It's a solar flare."

"Impossible. Must be a malfunction."

"It's signaling on our bus too," the driver of the other crawler said.

"They wouldn't have let us leave Station. If it's really a solar flare, the X-ray satellites should have warned Station hours ago." Damn it. The anxious faces of the commission members turned back and forth between Charlotte and the drivers. Well, let them wonder. Station couldn't control the sun. But the X-ray detectors! Christ, what had gone wrong? The commission would tear them apart for this. If they survived.

"Satellites are both out, and the replacement bird's been delayed," her driver said. "Budget problems, remember?"

She hadn't been paying attention to how long they'd been traveling. "How long to get back to Station?"

"One hour, seven minutes." Not enough time then before the full brunt. The second, fatal wave of protons would reach the Moon before they could get back. Christ! How could this happen?

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"We can get to the Humboldt Sea in thirty-seven minutes."

"Call ahead. Find out how many mummy crates they can spare. Keep your fingers crossed."

Her words precipitated a flurry of talking. She overheard something about the "rights of the third world will no longer be trampled" coming from the direction of the two blue berets. The German and the Japanese looked frightened. Shit. Why now?

She toggled off and turned to the commissioners. "Radiation from a solar flare is heading our way and we have to find a place to take shelter." None of the commission members had been able to hear the entire conversation, but they had to guess the situation was grave. Their faces wore anxious looks. She explained how "mummy crate" was slang for radiation shelter because if you were caught outside of Station there was nothing you could do but to lie in one until the solar flare subsided. Still, she avoided looking into their eyes.

"Don't the hard suits protect us from radiation?" one of the clergymen asked.

The old ex-astronaut answered before she had a chance. "No. The radiation from a solar flare is too strong. We can't just hide behind a boulder either. When the radiation hits, it will scatter all over the surface. We need to find a radiation shelter or to get underground."

Charlotte tried not to think of Space Station Freedom when two Senators had bullied their way onto the space station, and there'd been a monster solar flare, and not enough room in the shelter, and the lottery that ensued. She'd stopped voting after that. And the Earth's magnetic field had mitigated solar flares on Freedom. On the Moon they would have to bear the full brunt of the flare. Please let there be enough crates!

"It's Biankowski," one of the drivers said. Charlotte changed channels. "One of the underground smelters is closed for repairs. Should be big enough for everyone in hard suits...*buzz*..." The flare was already breaking up the radio signal. "*Bz-zzz*...enough air. Could be a rough twenty-four hours...*bzzz*...shelter for four buried not too far from the smelter. *Buzz-zz*...resupplied with food just last week. Send *bzzz* three weakest or oldest into the shelter *bzzz* with one of the drivers to instruct them."

"Good." She told the drivers to let the commissioners know what was going on, watching relief relax the taut muscles of their faces. "Charlotte...*bz-zz-zzz*...another problem."

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Right, it couldn't be that easy. "Carter's still out at the volcano ...*bzzz*...sent everyone back to Station, but he's found something that's scared the bejeebees out of him...*bzz-zzz-zz*...needs monitoring even during the flare."

"What is it?"

"...doesn't know. *Bzzz*...some kind of liquid seepage. Like the rocks are melting. Says you're the geologist. He wants to know if you can get over...*bzzzz*...into the volcano before the main wave of radiation...*bzz-zz-zz*."

"I don't have a scooter."

"*Bzzz-zz-z*...Suit up the commissioners...transfer...*bzzz* onto a single crawler. You should be able to take the other one back to the volcano in fifty-three minutes...*buzz-zz*...tight, but do-able."

"You got a deal. Tell Carter to leave his notes and get the hell out of there. If it's just a minor flare, I'll see you guys in a few hours, but if it ends up being major — I don't feel like sharing a crate."

"*Bzzz-zz*...don't like the idea of you being *bzzzz* alone down there for days."

St. August was watching her again. She turned away from him, toward the window and spoke softly into her collar. "Don't be silly. I know the volcano like the back of my hand. Anyway, Carter is the chemist, he'll be more help running lab tests of the liquid-whatever-it-is and, as long as the flare isn't too bad, radioing the results back to me."

She spoke louder, to the commissioners. "Solar flares are pretty routine up here. The underground smelter is a very safe place to sit one out. Plenty of leftover oxygen from the mining operations, and there's a restaurant on the edge of the Sea. They should be able to load the smelter up with food before the proton wave hits. Meantime, the boss man wants me back at the volcano to finish up some work."

The commissioners helped each other into their helmets while the driver gave Charlotte last minute instructions on how to operate the crawler. She watched St. August put his helmet on in the rearview mirrors. Whatever hold he had on her was getting more tenous, dimmed by frantic activity.

She waited only long enough for the commissioners to off-load before heading toward the volcano. The tracks of the crawler churned dusty regolith, blurring the small cluster of hard-suited figures she could still make out in her

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side mirrors. Barring any major obstructions, she would reach the volcano with seven minutes to spare. Seven minutes to crawl through the passageways to safety underground.

No sense breathing air she would need down in the volcano. Keeping her left hand on the steering wheel, she popped the safeties on her collar with her right and tipped the helmet back. She felt for the air/off switch with her fingers. There was a bulge in her left breast pocket. Damn, she'd forgotten to give the commissioners their pills. Well, how out of whack could their circadian rhthyms get their second night on the Moon? The solar flare probably wouldn't last more than a few hours anyway. Still, it was embarrassing. She rarely screwed up like that.

The digital map signaled a course straight across a wide plain. She picked her way around the larger craters. If the crawler threw a track out here, she would die. Don't think about it, she told herself. Just drive.

The crawler ride grew choppy. Through the windshield, she saw she was entering a rock-strewn basalt plain. Shit. She pulled up a distance profile on the digital map. Seventeen minutes longer to go around it. No choice. She had to go through. The crawler rocked from side to side as first one track then the other passed over the by now sizable rocks.

The bus shook and seemed to move sideways instead of forward. Another moonquake. What was going on? There'd never been so many before. Something lurched in the back of the bus. She heard a thump and then cursing. The crawler headed over a fair-sized boulder at the same time that she turned her head to see what was going on in the back. She almost lost control of the steering.

"Get out here where I can see you," she yelled as the crawler bucked back into control.

Nothing.

"You might as well come out. I know you're there."

Footsteps.

Her pulse raced. She knew it was St. August without looking in the mirror. How dare he risk both their lives like this?

He sat in the seat next to the driver's, not speaking for the rest of the trip. Watching her. There was no time to take him back to the other bus. She tried to radio the breach of procedure to Station, but the radio no longer penetrated the increasing radiation. She would be within her rights to put him out for

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ignoring the radiation warning, for refusing to take shelter as ordered. No court would find her guilty. Not after Freedom.

A small blue vein pulsed on his forehead. He looked so intense as he surveyed the moonscape, intensely fragile, so different from the guitar-playing idol who ignored the thousands of worshippers at his feet. And really, didn't Michael Carter gently remind her at least once a week to be less brusque with her own technicians? She sometimes treated them and even Carter himself like things existing only to help her get her work done. Not that she treated herself much differently. There was always a new problem that had to be thought about, a robot that needed fixing, a sample to analyze. Work was everything.

How different was she really from a rock-n-roll star who dealt with thousands of fans at a time? Did he see more than a mob? Did he think about the millions of individuals who had to work hours to pay for his CDs? Did the commissioner see people in Moon Station, or just a pack of money-wasting scientists?

Maybe she wasn't being fair. There'd been that time when she had been so worried about her grade in English that instead of her tutoring Jimmy in Math, he'd helped her write a poem. She'd forgotten that. She'd also put out of her mind how taken her teacher had been with the images of a young Ohioan standing on Tecumseh's grave, wondering about the modern-day alliances American leaders were forming. It had kept an embarrassing "D" off her report card. Jimmy had even set it to music, though no one but Charlotte had ever heard it performed.

The volcano appeared like a waveless black lake on the horizon. "There it is," she said. She cast a sidelong glance at St. August's face, watching it register surprise as he saw how different it was from volcanoes back on Earth. Just a hole in the ground.

Fifty-one minutes. Nine minutes to get as far underground as possible.

She held St. August in his seat by the shoulders for an instant, looking down into his eyes. "Do exactly as I say," she told him. "One deviation and you're a dead man." She could see he didn't believe her. "I have every right to abandon you. Don't doubt that I will, if you fuck up." That seemed to cause a flicker of interest. He stared back at her, a slight smile on his lips. What did he see? What was he thinking? Should she slap his smirk away? She was wasting time. "We have a serious situation here. No one, not Station, nor my colleague Michael Carter, would ask me to come here during a solar flare

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unless it were a life or death emergency." She straightened, put on her helmet, checked the seals on his, then signaled him to follow.

Once out of the bus, she held his glove in hers. She wouldn't take a chance accidentally having him bounce away from her by stepping too heavily. She pulled him into the ancient vent, walking quickly, no time for sightseeing. Shiny black walls reflected light from a string of bare bulbs leading down into the mouth of the volcano. As it grew darker, Charlotte showed St. August how to pop up the mirrored visor that hung down over their faceplates. The floor of the cavern had been spread with ten centimeters of regolith. She was thankful for the firm footing.

While the Moon's surface was gray and lifeless, its depths were vibrant with color. The black obsidian walls of the surface rille were iridescent with trace minerals. As she walked down, the light play caused the walls to shimmer, now blue-black, now green-black. The magma dike, the first place where her crew had had to actually burrow down into the volcano, stopped St. August, as she knew it would. The walls and ceiling in the narrow, hollowed-out chamber were pink rose quartz studded with metre-long, light-green pegmatite crystals. The path led down into another natural vent, formed millions of years ago by gasses exploding up to the surface. Red and black granite walls topped by fine yellow needles of sulphur made the ceiling appear to be growing hair.

The walls trembled. She blinked to get the sweat out of her eyes. Not again! She felt the floor vibrate under her feet. The vibration increased, splintering pieces off the sides of the vent. It knocked her into the wall, then up against the ceiling before she tumbled onto St. August. They sprawled on the floor, sulphur dust covering their hard suits. "You okay?" she asked, even though the radio was out.

He must have heard her. He nodded and smiled at her through the faceplate. "Hell of a solar flare," she heard above the static. What a time for jokes! "More like an eruption."

Could St. August be right? She lifted herself off of him, afraid he would see her fright though her faceplate. There was no choice. They had to keep going down into the volcano. She couldn't know for certain if it was an eruption, but to go back outside during a solar flare was to die. She helped him up and motioned for him to follow. They ran, Charlotte showing him how to bounce off the walls to propel himself forward.

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Carter had left his storage cabinet open. She stooped down to grab his package of notes and an extra ration kit. At least she could record what was happening in the volcano.

The cavern shook again, knocking loose more volcanic debris. "Run!" she yelled at St. August. One more bend. Another. Finally they were deep enough.

She flopped down under a lamp next to some storage lockers and tried to catch her breath while pulling out Carter's map and unfolding it.

St. August sat on the edge of the writing desk in the dark, watching her. "What now?" he asked, the static dissipated by tons of moonrock. "Is the volcano erupting?"

"I don't know. There's nothing we can do about it in any case. We're stuck down here until the flare ends. Carter's notes show the seepage beginning half a klick from here, about a hundred meters further down. That's why he asked me to come down here. We might as well get to work. We'll hear the radios signal an all-clear once the flare ends."

"Okay. Let's go."

Charlotte pushed herself up onto her knees. Another wobble of the vent floor kept her down. She had just pulled herself up again when St. August knocked her down from behind, pushing her away. The lights sputtered and died out as the vent shook again.

She flicked on her helmet light and whirled around. A row of storage cabinets fell down onto his back. She heard his suit alarm in her earphone. He'd punctured his suit.

She scrambled up, ran back to where he lay and lifted the metal cabinets so he could crawl out. An ominous hiss sounded in her radio. No! Let it be static, please! The startled look in his eyes told her it wasn't. He was losing air. And quickly. If she remembered correctly, there were two shelters, both about the same distance away. One was at the end of a lateral vent, the other down past where Carter had found his liquid. She could try to find the leak, but it could take several minutes. Minutes that could be used in getting to a shelter. She decided to go down. Once St. August was safe, she could backtrack and observe Carter's discovery. Alone. The way she had planned.

"Move it!" She took his hand again. "Now!" she yelled when he was slow getting to his feet. Her eyes were adjusting to the helmet light and the dim phosphorescence of the salt-encrusted vent walls. The vent veered left, then down even more sharply. She wanted to run, but she couldn't risk him

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overexerting himself. "Look on the gauge on the left inside of your helmet where the red light is flashing and read me the numbers."

"It reads three liters per sixty minutes."

Christ, that was fast. "You have an air leak. We're walking to an underground shelter where you'll be safe. Try to stay very calm. It'll be close, but I think you can make it."

The volcano shuddered again. It was almost as if she could hear it. She sat down, pulling him down with her. She wouldn't let the volcano hurl them about this time. "Did you hear that?" St. August asked.

"Yes. I'd say it was an auditory hallucination of some kind." But it couldn't be, she thought, not if he heard it too. "If the volcano really is erupting, perhaps the vent is filling with some kind of gas." They stayed down until after the shaking subsided.

"One more turn and we should be where Carter saw the seepage." The vent opened into a huge cavern. To the left of the path should have been a chasm whose bottom couldn't be seen with ordinary helmet lights. It was filled with a mass of some kind that twinkled yellow and green. St. August looked frightened. Hell, she was terrified herself, if she had to admit it. "What is it?" he asked her.

"I don't know. It looks like ice, but there's so much of it. It's not supposed to happen like this." She stepped forward to get a better look. Could she be looking at the stuff of her dreams? The stuff that would cut Station's biological umbilical to Earth?

Suddenly the mass pulsed, as if it were alive. She jumped back and bumped her helmet on the cavern wall. Stupid. Just like a rookie, she cursed herself. "Whatever it is, we've got to get past it. The mummy crate is on the other side."

Parts of the mass were already slopping onto the path. "Try not to get it on your suit. Could be sulphuric acid, or some other nasty thing volcanoes are fond of collecting." It could be ammonia too, she thought. Please let it be ammonia! She could hardly wait to tell Carter.

They ran along the path and down the next corridor. Then up again. A steep climb up a ladder. She looked back. Ice was following them. So much ice! Where was it all coming from? The moon had been geologically dead for millions of years. It had to be Station, the only new variable. Waste heat from Station was melting it somehow, causing it to surge.

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St. August lurched to the side, like a drunk struggling to regain his balance. Another warning sounded over her radio. She ran to St. August and helped him to sit down to conserve energy.

"Go on without me," he said.

She watched the ice creep closer. The floor of the passageway they had just walked through was completely covered. "Don't be silly. Try to stay as still as possible. I'm going to run ahead. There have to be spare oxygen cylinders at the shelter."

"Don't come back for me. There's no sense in both of us dying."

"No one's going to die. You're talking nonsense." She helped him lie down.

It made good sense to leave him and not come back. She might return to find him already dead of asphyxiation, or his suit eaten away by sulphuric acid ice. Taking oxygen out of the shelter would jeopardize her own survival chances.

There was something animal in the way his eyes peered out at her through his faceplate. Not fright. Even more elemental. An urge to survive that penetrated even his mental confusion. And something else, something almost as if he believed she could let him die. That frightened her most of all.

She stood up and started running, bouncing off the walls to propel herself forward more quickly. St. August's testimony could end the space program. But if he died here...? How fragile he was, this great rock and roll star. An icy sweat trickled down her face, stinging her eyes as she realized what enormous power she held in her own two hands. She could save Station just by letting him die, just by being a little slow in coming back with the oxygen. It was so easy to kill. Too easy.

She ran faster.

EIGHT MINUTES THERE and back. And three more tremors. The ice had to be causing them. And they could be felt all the way back on Station. After seeing the mass of ice inside the volcano, she wondered, could Station survive intact? And with seismic tomography, it could all have been avoided. Why hadn't they smuggled explosives to the Moon despite the ban?

There had been only two spare oxygen cylinders. She took them both. His oxygen was leaking so badly he would need them. It also meant there wouldn't be enough air in the shelter to keep them alive for more than a day, two at most.

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He was barely conscious. The ice had crept up into the passageway until it almost touched his boots. Her hands fumbled with the buckles of the old canisters. His eyes pleaded for air. She hesitated. This was her last chance. How could she give him back to the mob and let it destroy Station, her life's work?

His gauntlet reached for her. She could see the enormous effort the raised hand was costing him in the perspiration on his forehead. The gauntlet trembled, then fell. A resigned expression replaced his panic.

She stood up and turned her back to him so she wouldn't have to watch. This was hardball. Real life. Play to win. With two canisters of air, she at least, would survive.

She couldn't wipe the look in his eyes from her mind. St. August wasn't to blame for the slavishness of his fans. He'd undertaken a dangerous mission to the Moon to call attention to the problem of dwindling resources and to try to help the third world. Did he deserve to die for that?

She grew angry with herself. Why couldn't she have more willpower? She looked down at her hands, despising them. Then, making a fist with both hands, she smashed them into the basalt wall with all her might. The surface glass splayed out like cracked pond ice. She wanted her hands to bleed, but the hard suit protected them.

She knelt down next to St. August. His eyes, like a drunken man's, had trouble focusing on her. With a deep breath, she said good-bye to Station, to her future, and grabbed the oxy tanks. She disconnected the old cylinders, then punched the air nozzles into the new ones. Several minutes passed before he was coherent enough to understand her words.

He leaned on her shoulder most of the way to the shelter. Ice followed them closely, lapping across the regolith-strewn path like a crazed amoeba, absorbing black dust, mica flakes and glass beads into its probing foot. Behind the blackened foot, the ice formed a gigantic pale yellow wave with a grayish-green crest that spilled out of the tunnel they had just passed through. No way back to the surface. Not now.

The mummy crate was sleek and silver. A Porsche with elaborate fins. Charlotte flipped up the small shielded metal flap in its lid that hid the electronic lock. Her gauntleted fingers punched the code out onto the keypad. The lid popped open, revealing two plastic couches separated by a bank of gauges and switches. Clear plastic bags of food lined both side walls. Controls

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flickered to life as the lid rose. The regolith-laden foot scraped underneath the capsule sliding it upwards as she struggled to help St. August onto one of the plastic couches and slid down into the other one.

Electronic locks clicked shut. Air vents sished as the shelter pressurized itself. Before she could finish checking the control settings, the yellow ice wave surged up and slapped its crest down onto the capsule, blocking the viewports.

Once St. August could lie down and rest, he seemed to recover quickly. His thank you's were an embarrassment as she helped him remove his helmet and lie back in the couch.

Would he tell the Commission she'd tried to murder him? Did it matter? The destruction of Station by the ice would end it all anyway. If only they'd been able to evacuate everyone safely. Every accidental death seemed to set the program back a decade. People needed the time to reassess and to regroup their will to conquer space. Even without fatalities on Station, St. August's testimony was certain to end the space program. Did anything else matter? But if his charmed life ended here? Every Independence Day thousands crowded the streets around the Staten Island mansion where Mick Jagger had died of old age on a July Fourth earlier in the century. Couldn't all that power be channeled into the space program somehow?

She watched his shoulders rise as he took a deep breath. His hand reached up to rub a bead of sweat from the bridge of his straight aquiline nose. He was a miracle of motion and chemical reactions and words.

"There's one chance, but it's a long shot," she said, wondering how extensive his briefing had been.

"What is it?"

"We put out a radio beacon so Station personnel can find us, then we lower the temperature in the shelter and our body temperature close to freezing. That way we use as little oxygen as possible. It might just last long enough. There must be tons of debris all around us. It will take days to tunnel through." If anyone was left alive on Station. She pulled her hands up into the suit and unscrewed the gauntlets. With bare hands she unfastened her helmet catches and tipped it back. Her fingers ripped open the velcro holding her breast pocket shut. She pulled out the two envelopes filled with pills that she'd forgotten to give the commissioners. "These are metabolic regulators." She waved the packages at him.

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She put the yellow package back into her pocket. "We've had a lot of problems adjusting to the 354 continuous hours of daylight and night," she said. "So we use these to raise and lower the metabolic rate, artificially simulating the circadian rhythms of Earth."

"Let's do it."

She tried to keep her heart still. "It's not that easy. I have no idea of the dosages. We should probably take more than the normal two needed to bring on sleep, but if we guess wrong..."

"It's better than doing nothing."

She adjusted the shelter controls. "I'm a only geologist. No guarantees. And even if it does work, there's a good chance we'll lose toes or...fingers."

"I've played guitar long enough," he said. "Time to take up something new. No sense getting stale."

The noise of ripping open the blue envelope was intense. Was it the last time she would hear paper tear? Speak, Charlotte, don't lose it know. "What do you think? Should we take four? Double the regular dose and hope it's enough?"

"Oh hell, let's take eight. If you're going to do something, might as well do it right."

She smiled at his joke. He would expect her to. Both of them remembered how the high school St. August had been content just to slide by. She pulled two water tubes from the storage rack and handed him one. Her fingers tapped eight tablets out into her hand. St. August rolled over on his side and took hold of her hand, the hand that had refused to let her die. He brought it up to his lips, closing his eyes as he ate the pills from her palm. Charlotte damned her lack of self-control, as she felt her face redden.

Her blush didn't go unnoticed. She tried to pull her hand away, but he kept hold of it. "As long as we're going to die anyway, and before I lose my fingers, there's something I've wanted to do for years, but never had the guts to try," he said.

"Oh yeah?" He let go of her hand so she could swallow her own pills.

She brought the pills to her lips and gagged trying to swallow the first one.

"What could rock star Jimmy St. August be afraid of?" she asked him, still holding seven of the pills in her hand, but she knew what he wanted. *Sieg Heil!* Wasn't it enough that she had saved his life? Weren't millions of adoring fans enough for him? She wouldn't allow him to make her walk that walk and

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then take away everything that mattered to her with his presidential commission. The rest of her pills went down easy.

"Kiss my sophomore math tutor," he said.

She let him unhook her helmet from the suit. He was so sure of himself, but the kiss was tentative, his lips barely brushing hers.

Another quake shook the crate. Ice and rocks scraped across the metal skin of the capsule. For the first time since dedicating her life to studying volcanoes, she felt outright panic. This time there was no place to run to when she needed a break. No hitting the beaches of Maui when the fires of Kilauea got too hot. This time she was forced to submit to the whims of the volcano itself. Careful, Charlotte, don't fight it, an adrenaline surge now will kill you.

She smelled the skin of his neck, his shoulder, tasted the skin of his jawline. It felt so good to be alive. The ice pushed the capsule another meter further up toward surface. She cried out and crushed her lips against his, parting her lips for his tongue to enter.

He pulled away, cupping her face in his hands, and laughed. Then he pulled her face close again and gave her a real kiss, his tongue probing deep inside. Her stomach lurched. He moved away again. No. She tried to pull him against her. Now. Before they were crushed by the ice. He held her away and began unbuckling his suit, then hers. "I'm glad we never did this as kids."

He kissed her forehead. "I like the way you are now," he said, his lips hovering centimeters away from hers. So close. "If I'd have been a part of your life way back when, you'd have changed." He smiled an ironic smile. "Who knows? You might have become the drummer in a garage band."

She stared into his eyes, willing him to stop talking, so he wouldn't say anything to end the spell. She put both hands over his mouth and kissed his eyelids. He grabbed one of her wrists in each hand and held them together in front of her face. "Such little hands," he said. "What did it feel like to hold someone's life in your two little hands?" He laughed when she pulled her hands away from him, catching them again easily and pinning them next to her head on the plastic lounge. She tried to pull them free. This time he didn't let go.

"Now you know what it's like to have power. " He held both her wrists in one hand above her head. "You like it, don't you? It's like that at first. You could have left me out there. No one would have been the wiser. You wanted to. You should have. That way your precious Station would have been safe.

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With the extra air, you might have survived. What made you change your mind and decide to bring me here?"

Before she could answer, he unzipped the front of her suit liner and slipped his hand in. Slowly. Enjoying the effect he was having on her. She shuddered and closed her eyes. The temperature was dropping quickly now, but she was hardly aware of how cold it was. "Power isn't something I ever worked for," he said. "It just happens. I wish it would go away. People around me always change. I have trouble in math, and suddenly the strictest teacher in the department, a woman who never gives anyone a break, decides all I need is a little extra tutoring. A garage band I join signs a contract and starts selling megahits." He kissed her again, more demanding this time. "No one's ever tried to kill me before. Certainly not a famous scientist." Charlotte felt her cheeks blush. "Don't ever change," he whispered, so close she felt his breath on her cheek.

She knew she should remind him about the "Nuke the Scientists" button. She should hold him accountable for his silly speech about the burdens of power. A speech as fatuous as a rock-n-roll lyric. What did he think his work on the commission was? How dare he patronize her. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words would come. What was he doing to her? His eyes filled with tears. They dripped down onto her cheeks and words no longer mattered. Her mouth sought his chin, his fingers, his tongue, his nipples. She wanted him. Now. Before the pill-induced hypothermia shut down their bodies. Before the ice crushed the shelter. Before they were pushed up to the surface into the toxic proton cloud.

The lights blinded Charlotte. She shut her eyes again, listening to the beep of electronics, to the voices issuing orders.

"She's coming round," someone said.

"Thank God." Someone else who sounded like Michael Carter.

She tried to lift her hand. It hurt. A big IV stuck out of bandages taped across the inside of her elbow. Her hand was wrapped in thick bandages.

Carter avoided touching the bandaged hand and lifted her arm gently, laying it back across her stomach. He briefly turned his back to her and seemed to be taking a deep breath. When he faced her again, he was smiling.

"Congratulations, you're a hero!"

"I...what?"

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"St. August left a note telling us how you kept going deeper into the volcano even though you thought it might be erupting. You have nerves of steel, Charlotte. I would have made for the surface, and the ice would have pushed me right out into the radiation."

A note? He *left* a note? No! "Jimmy? Jimmy St. August?" She struggled to ask the question even though she was terrified to have it answered.

"He's fine..."

Carter kept talking but Charlotte didn't understand the words. He was fine! He was alive! Thank God! She looked around the room, searching for him, expecting to see the infirmary and Dr. Lanie, but nothing was familiar. "Where are we? Aren't we on Station?"

"We're at the launch facility." Carter looked down at the floor. "Station is gone. But at least no one was killed. We've had to temporarily evacuate most personnel back to Earth. It was too dangerous to move you, so we brought the specialists up here."

"The ice..." she said, remembering.

"Ammonia!" Carter's face beamed and grew animated. "And water ice. Waste heat from Station melted a huge pocket of clathrates. It exploded up through the regolith like a geyser. Imagine, Charlotte. Tons of ammonia. We'll have all the nitrogen we need to make Station biologically self-sufficient."

The new doctor from Earth tapped Carter on the shoulder and urged him to the door, but Carter wasn't ready to leave just yet. "You better hurry up and get well, Charlotte. There's too much work for me to do alone. "

The strange doctor grew more insistent, holding onto Carter's elbow.

"I better go," he said, his voice breaking slightly. "Rest up."

Jimmy. Where was Jimmy? Charlotte wondered, as the doctor unwrapped the bandages covering her hands and mumbled something about minimizing necrosis and physical therapy. She barely listened until the sudden loosening of the gauze unleashed a wave of pain. Her fingers felt like they were on fire. She cried out in spite of herself "Sorry," the doctor mumbled as he sprayed something on her hands. "Nurse," he called.

A nurse holding an IV bag in his hand stepped forward and fiddled with Charlotte's IV, adjusting the drip of pain medication. He was alive. She didn't let herself think of what she had tried to do. She couldn't. Fleeing the ice had been a bad dream, an evil dream. She could awaken now. Carter had said he

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was alive. The doctor put on a fresh dressing. The nightmare was over. It was safe to let the pain medication take effect. She fell asleep while the doctor was still rewrapping her hands in gauze.

She felt him even before she awoke. She knew he would be in the room with her when she opened her eyes, but it was Michael Carter who spoke her name. "Charlotte. Can you wake up for a minute?"

A nurse propped up Charlotte's mattress and rearranged her pillows so she could sit up.

"St. August is recovered enough to be sent back to Earth. His bigger body mass kept his injuries to a minimum. We can only keep essential personnel on the Moon now until we rebuild Station." A reporter and camera man were fiddling with lights and video equipment at the entrance to her room. "The press wants to interview both of you and the PR department thinks it's a good idea. Think you can handle it?"

Charlotte didn't answer. Sitting in a wheelchair at the foot of her bed was St. August.

He got up and walked to her side.

She turned to look at the wall, the digital monitors next to her bed, anywhere but at him. "It's okay," he whispered into her ear. She felt his sandpapery fingertips on her cheek as he turned her face back and gently kissed her lips. "Never change. Promise me."

Then the questions started. From the reporter in her room and from other reporters on two-way video.

"How did the accident with the oxygen supply happen?" "When did it happen?" "How long before the flare started did you reach the volcano?" "What made you think the volcano was erupting?" "When did you realize the ice mass was surging?" "Why did Dr. Glass lead Mr. St. August to the shelter that lay furthest from the surface?" "How fast was the oxygen leak?"

"Are you going to sue the Space Agency, Mr. St. August?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Well, the dosage. You almost died."

"I was the one who very foolishly suggested taking eight pills. Charlotte wanted us to take only four pills. If I had only listened." His hand hovered over her bandages.

"What will you recommend to the President, Mr. St. August?" "Should the program go forward?" the reporter asked.

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"Of course. My visit has convinced me that the valuable work being done here on the moon should continue. Much of it accrues back to benefit the Earth and determining that was the main concern of my trip here."

The rest of the interview flew by in a blur. He wasn't going to stop the project! Charlotte realized. Her work was safe! When the reporters left, he bent over her bed and kissed her forehead.

She lifted up her bandaged lands, not caring that it hurt and held onto his arm. "Why?" she asked.

"Time to take up something new, I guess. " He flicked his long hair back over his shoulder. "Any way, I pay my debts. You were right. I did come to the Moon with the intention of shutting down Station. It still seems wrong to spend billions of dollars to keep a few scientists in space, when millions of kids back on Earth are dying of hunger." He brushed his fingertips across her cheek. "You could have left me to die. You saved my life with those pills back in the shelter.

"Don't change, Charlotte," he said, but it was too late. The explosion of clathrates had changed everything. Somehow, she didn't know quite how yet, but somehow she would prove to Jimmy St. August that Moon Station wasn't a waste of money. Work was what counted, and somehow she would show him that the space program was just the beginning, that one day it would feed all those starving millions he cared so much about.

When she woke again, Biankowski was sitting in a chair next to her bed. "Christ, we were lucky, Glass. First the solar flare. Then you and St. August. Then the damage to Station. Lucky no one was killed. That would have shut us down for sure. Good thinking, with the hypothermia thing. Though I think you could have kept your clothes on."

"My nakedness won't shut down the project, will it?"

"I hope this disaster won't. Every time the manned space program has fatalities — Apollo 1, Challenger, Freedom — the pressures to shut it down grow harder to resist." The boss disappeared from his demeanor and a little-boy wistfulness appeared in his eyes, as he asked, "St. August's report...?"

"Don't worry about him," Charlotte told him, wishing she weren't so sure, but St. August was running true to type. He really was shallow. How could he abandon his ideals to discharge a personal debt? Well, it fit the profile, didn't it?

She knew it was a lie as soon as she thought it, but it was a lie she needed to believe like she needed to breathe. Now, there was just a hint of a bitter

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taste in her mouth. There needed to be more. Concentrate, Charlotte. Finally, she felt as if she needed to spit.

Biankowski handed her a paper cup filled with water. She spat into a paper tissue. She could do it. She would work at it until she believed the lie. Again. Work, that was a thing she was good at. Work was what really counted,

Biankowski tried to shake her hand and got caught in the IV tubing. Untangling his own hand again, he settled for patting her on the shoulder. "Congratulations, Glass. You saved Station."

It felt good to be back on the Moon again. At work, where she belonged, Charlotte thought. She leafed through the sheets of chemical analyses with the prosthetic glove covering the damaged fingers of her left hand. The glove was getting easier to work with now, feeling almost natural. Her right hand wouldn't win any beauty contests, but it remained serviceable. No glove needed. "These look good, real good," she said to Michael Carter.

It wasn't just the analyses that looked good, but also the research proposals she'd seen lying on Biankowski's desk. Only the lack of ammonia had held the Space Agency back before. Genetic magnification of the protein content in root crops; amplification of the vitamins found in grains — the Moon was the perfect laboratory.

Carter shushed her and pointed at the TV in the corner of their shared office inside the laser launch facility.

Jimmy St. August was singing his latest single, written on the long flight back to Earth. His band, the Panterrans, played accompaniment.

"But if we have a future, on the Moon and on the Earth,
Then will you come and guide us, remind us of our worth?
And if we have a future, we cannot forget to dream
The Moon was made for dreaming in the sky
Did we forget we all were made to fly?

I learned death and redemption from the lady in the Moon
Across a harsh and blasted desert, I've seen a globe of priceless blue
From the Moon, we are the heaven in the sky
And I learned we are together one and all
Alone in bitter blackness, the Earth a fragile ball

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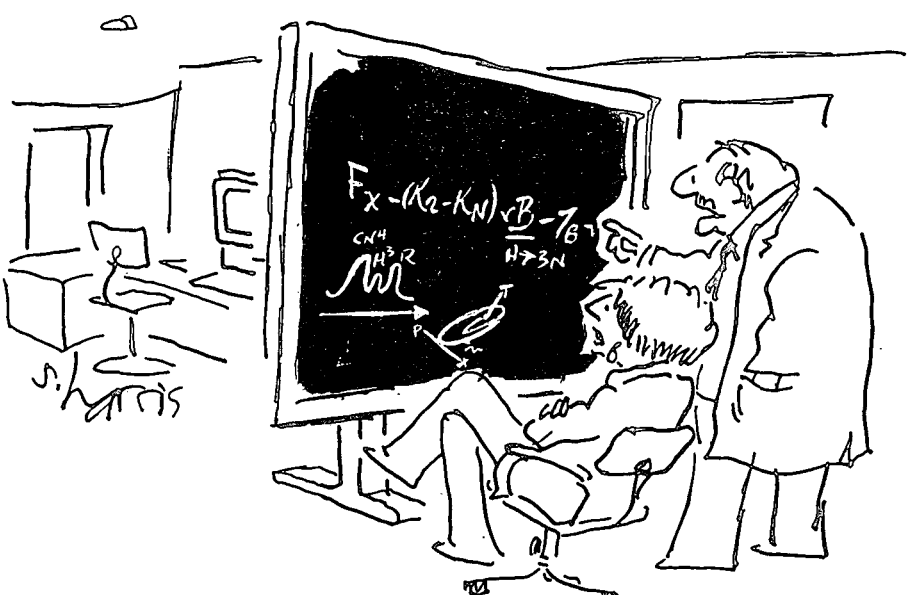
And from that far perspective, it's so small
But that makes it no less precious, not at all"

The camera cut to a news clip. St. August stepped out onto the top of the shuttle staircase. In the blitz of camera lights, his face glowed, as if surrounded by a halo.

Charlotte watched him raise the guitar-calloused fingers of both hands and wave to the fans crowding the tarmac behind the reporters.

For the first time she understood what he held in those empty hands. She wiped a tear from her cheek with the back of the glove. Still didn't make it right. Things were just too goddamned easy for him.

For Geoff Landis with many thanks for the encouragement, the numerous helpful articles, and conversations. And for being my friend.



"Change that seven to a three, and presto! Science Fiction!"

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GUILTY PLEASURES

MICHELLE WEST

I STARTED reading before I was seven; cut my teeth on Enid Blyton (about whom I will say nothing in these more enlightened times) and Nancy Drew, and moved on to the more fondly remembered Burroughs, Alcott, Lewis, Garner and Tolkien. But I read everything I could get my hands on, and some notable and noteworthy literary careers were forever ruined for me because my experience was not up to the task of understanding their work; I cannot read D.H. Lawrence without the echoes of my earlier boredom and total lack of understanding as to why anyone would a) want to have sex and b) want to read this man's aimless, pointless story surfacing to ruin the work yet again.

But I can still read Burroughs with the same enthusiasm I did as a ten-year-old because those seeds were planted, and sheltered, by a heart that wanted the splendid adventure and drama of the new, the larger than life, the unexplored. You have to read Burroughs with a certain heart, a certain optimism, a certain suspension of disbelief — and when I was young, I could believe in almost anything. Eternal Love. Great Heroics. Finding a place to belong.

I have a two-year-old. A writing career. A mortgage, a marriage, and two part-time jobs — one of them at a science fiction and fantasy specialty store — that keep our finances above water. The word "recession" has become a greater fear than any nebulous concept of evil, and I watch the interest rates rise and fall with more attention than I now pay to the history of whole empires. When I settle down for the precious spare hour between this task and that, I don't want to have to fight with a book, or, frankly, to work very hard at it. I want fun. I want books with a just, if not downright happy, ending. I want a gleeful wallow. I want to step into the someplace-that-isn't-here and find a place to catch my breath, or better, to find the echoes of all

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those early wonderments that made — and still make — of the interior world a magical, sheltered place.

And I want to share those novels with you. There are a lot of great books that you won't see in this column, and I make no apology or excuse for their absence. What you will see here are those books that fulfill — or promise, and fail to live up to — my criterion for a good read. And so, on.

Fifth Quarter by Tanya Huff, DAW Books, $4.99.

In the Havalkeen Empire, assassins are allowed to ply their trade — under the auspices of the Imperial army. To desert is death or worse. Assassins are not well-loved — they're too feared for that — but they're not despised either; they're specialized soldiers, but with less leeway and less backup if things go wrong. In fact, with one exception, assassins have no backup; they work in isolation.

The exception is the book. Bannon and Vree are brother and sister. A year separates them in age, but in nothing else. They work together. Live together. Kill together.

What does an assassin think of, when there's only one person in her life that she can really remember trusting — or loving? How does she guard her thoughts, keep some distance between herself and the brother who has been, and remains, the focal point of her world? What does she do when, sent out on a mission to assassinate the governor of a province, she finds her brother trapped in a poisoned, dying old man's body, his own body somehow taken from him?

What she's always done. She protects him. But this time, she protects him by letting him into everything that she is. Bannon, dying, finds a home in his sister's body — more than a passenger, but less than a driver. It's exquisitely uncomfortable, but Vree doesn't intend to let him stay there forever. She follows the body that she's known all her life, promising Bannon to retrieve it from whoever it is who's occupying it now.

And she finds a man named Gyhard, lurking beneath the familiar lines of a face that she's always been a little too close to. She intends to kill him. But to do it, she has to desert the army. To desert is death, and worse — it's a break with the safety of routine and tradition at a time when she needs both badly to remain sane.

Death is everywhere in this book: assassins, Gyhard the body-jumper, the army, the walking dead. But it isn't, in the end, decay that the novel is about. It's change, both subtle and

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not-so-subtle, that Huff is interested in. Huff's strength lies in the believability of the characters she creates. They aren't perfect — far from it — and they aren't the novelistically "pure" archetypes that can often feel so distant. They're earthy, flawed, damaged.

And they can be, if they desire it and see the need, made whole.

This isn't fluff, and it isn't light — but it has so much heart to leaven its dark moments that it is a someplace-that-isn't-here in which to find belief in redemption.

Circus of the Damned by Laurell K. Hamilton, Ace Books, $5.50.

This book is like a roller coaster. First, you can be thrilled by the ups and the downs, but you always know that you're never going to derail, no matter how unpleasant the ground looks when it's approaching. Second, you get on it of your own accord, and it takes you pretty much back to where you started, but you leave with no sense of having being cheated for the lack of progress; in fact, you might just go back and stand in line again for the same privilege.

This is the third in a series of books that feature Anita Blake, the tough, no-nonsense woman that Vampires know as The Executioner, and the undead in general know as trouble, owing to the fact that she's also a Necromancer in a world where corpses can be brought back to "life" to sign a will and Vampires are citizens with the same rights as anyone else.

Anita Blake has clashed with the Master of the City — a Vampire, of course — and she not only knows who he is, but also knows that she's in danger of becoming his human servant if she doesn't stay well away. Which is of course why she immediately falls into a situation where she can't. You see, there's a rogue master Vampire on the loose, which is both a challenge to the Master of the City, and a headache and worse for Blake; there are the fanatics of the newly formed Humans First league, who want to stake the Master of the City — and her, if she won't lead them to him; and there's Edward, the assassin-turned-Vampire-hunter — no altruism here, he just likes a real challenge — who's been hired to kill the Master of the City, and who knows that Anita is the only person who can lead him to his target. Did I mention that Edward isn't above a little torture if that's what it takes to get the answers he wants?

Blake isn't an aggressive hero, although she comes across that way. She's sort of what you'd get if you

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crossed a tough-guy gumshoe and Pauline (of the Perils of Pauline) — everyone loves or lusts after her, and everyone wants her because she's got that extra-special something, but you can safely admire her because she always says no. The pace of the book doesn't completely hide the fact that it's self-indulgent — but it's a funny, slick and entirely appropriate indulgence, given the Vampire archetype.

You miss a little background if you pick it up here — which is where I started — but frankly, the whole thing moves so damned quickly you don't really notice what you're missing until long after the last page is turned. Frothy, pleasant fun.

Star Trek Deep Space Nine: Proud Helios by Melissa Scott, Pocket Books, $5.50.

Helios is the name of a pirate ship that's plagued Cardassian space — and merchants — for a number of years. Ruled by a necessarily iron-fisted alien, it's about to cross the very thin line between Federation space and Cardassian space in pursuit of the Xawe trader, *Gift of Flight*. *Gift of Flight* manages to get a distress signal out — one that is picked up by Deep Space Nine. Enter Commander Benjamin Sisko and the crew of the popular third generation Star Trek series.

The first fifty pages of this novel are surprisingly strong — although I suppose it shouldn't be a surprise, given that Scott won the John W. Campbell award for best new writer, and was nominated for a Hugo for the novel *Dreamships* — as Bashir and Kira race against the warp clock to reach *Gift of Flight* before the pirates can.

The pirates become the focal point of the novel from two sides: The Federation wants them. The Cardassians want them. And Deep Space Nine gets caught in the middle when two prominent members of the crew are kidnapped. The usual threat of war with the Cardassians ensues as Sisko maneuvers his way around all obstacles with the rescue of his crew in his sights.

I think each author who takes up pen in the Trek universe handles a particular character with a bit more verve or depth than they do the rest — and Scott's character is Kira Nerys. With a deft glimpse here, an equivocal memory there, she really brings the former freedom fighter to light.

Perhaps Kira is most strongly detailed because she's a woman with a past that the Federation wouldn't be proud of, which adds a depth to her character. Or perhaps the author has a natural interest that inclines her to the less black-and-white situation.

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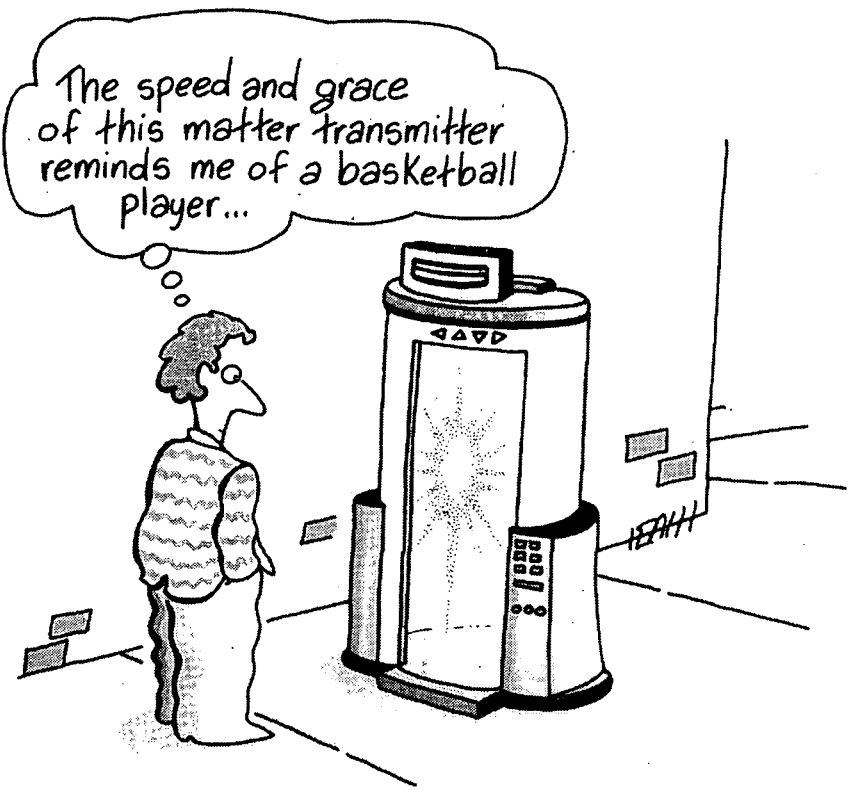
You have to rein yourself in when you go out to play in another person's universe, but I think I would have liked to see a little more play on those reins. For instance, there's a complexity to the crew of the pirate ship *Helios* that is hinted at, but never fully explored, and in the end they remain the villains of the piece.

I have one quibble: I didn't believe the pirate's masquerade for a minute. Given the nature of the novel, however, the quibble is a minor one, and I can cheerfully say that this is a good, safe couple of hours entertainment. So go turn off the *Deep Space Nine* reruns and pick this up.



Any technology, sufficiently advanced, will seem like Magic Johnson.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Baby Be-Bop, by Francesca Lia Block, Joanna Cotler Books/ HarperCollins, 1995, 106pp, $13.95, Hardcover

YOU'D HAVE to be awfully hard-hearted not to like Block's novels. She touches on dark matters in them, it's true, but she does so with warmth, humor, truth, and a whimsical nature that never manages to undermine the more serious concerns from which her stories grow. Instead her fanciful imagination and light-hearted wordplay resonates against the real world issues, throwing the latter into sharp relief while she strengthens the spirit with that treasure too many of us have lost: a sense of hope. And don't be fooled by how her books are usually filed in the Young Adult section — like the best fairy tales and myths, her stories are timeless and are as suitable for an adult as a teenager

Baby Be-Bop is her latest excursion into a Los Angeles she calls Shangri-L.A., the same setting that was first introduced in *Weetzie Bat.* It's a coming out story of a young gay boy, a painful journey from innocence into darkness until the protagonist finally emerges — not intact, not with all his problems solved, but at least with a sense of his own worth and that gift of hope I mentioned earlier. There are some wonderfully surreal scenes toward the end of the book, a true no-holds-barred glimpse into both the turmoil of what it's like to be young and different (which I'm sure we all feel/ felt, to one degree or another) and a lovely dialogue between characters, and between the book and its readers, on the importance of Story: how we all have a story and the greatest gift we can give is to share it, because when we share the story it makes room for us to hold the stories that others want to share with us.

I highly recommend any of Block's novels to you and if they move you, as I hope they will, I'd like you to pass the word on. Writers who can utilize such a large fictional scope,

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who can call up such a wide palette of emotion in one small book as Block can, deserve to be nurtured and treasured. And shared.

Wildside, by Steven Gould, Tor Books, 1996, 320pp, $22.95, Hardcover

This, like Gould's earlier novel *Jumper*, is quintessential sf, set not in the far reaches of space, but right smack dab in the middle of here and now. He takes one anomaly — here a portal into a parallel earth untouched, and therefore unexploited, by man — and extrapolates what real folks would do confronted with it. The delight of *Jumper* was the detail to which Gould's young protagonist worked out what he could do with his ability to teleport and that delight in detail is repeated here, though the cast is larger.

Charlie Newell is the central character of *Wildside*, fresh out of high school and moving into the farmhouse and accompanying property left to him by his late uncle. It's on this land that the portal lies and Charlie has a plan that involves four of his schoolmates. Because the parallel world is a twin of ours, minus the people, they're going to go into it with maps and bring back some of the gold and silver that's simply lying there for the taking. They have every intention of keeping the world secret for although they're taking a little of its natural resources away, they know how quickly it could become as polluted and exploited as our world has been.

Needless to say, the secret comes out and the next thing they know they' re trapped in the parallel world with renegade U.S. government agents taking over Newell's farm and waiting for them on the other side of the portal.

The book starts off a bit slow — the downside of giving a lot of detail. There's a touch too much on how Newell and his friends are preparing for their trip, and certainly too much on the mechanics of flying, but it's worth sticking with it for the payoff. Once the story starts moving, it doesn't let up. The writing is crisp and Gould rapidly has readers caring about the relationships of his characters and their real-world problems apart from the main storyline. The way they think their way through their ever-increasing problems is reminiscent of the best of the old-styled sf stories.

But this isn't some retro book, trying to recapture some simpler and better time that never was. Gould also finds time to deal with fundamental issues of property and citizen

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rights, as well as the more personal problems of addiction, sexual identity and the baffling complexity of interpersonal relationships. In other words, *Wildeside* is a fully rounded book, better written and more fun than ninety-percent of the other novels with which it's vying for shelf space.

Door Number Three, by Patrick O'Leary, Tor Books, 1995, 384pp, $23.95, Hardcover

I almost missed this one. And I would have, too, except I was clearing out the stack of galleys that had piled up at the end of last year and just before it went out with the rest, I remembered that I'd really been looking forward to reading this one when it first arrived. Somehow it had gotten bumped from the top of the to-be-read pile into some I'll-probably-never-get-to-it limbo until luck or fate put it back into my hand. Don't let it happen to you because it might well be the best sf novel of the past year.

The initial conceit is wonderful. Since there's no point in my trying to paraphrase what some editor wrote so well, let me quote from the press release: "John Donnelly's life is changed forever the day Laura, a young therapy patient, tells him that she has been left for a year on Earth by the Holock, an alien race. If she can convince one person — and she has chosen him — that she is telling the truth, she can stay when they come back for her. And she exposes her breasts as evidence, revealing square nipples. His least profound response is to drop his cigarette into the crease in his chair."

Donnelly's conundrum might well have fared as the whole plot for some other novel, but O'Leary merely uses it as a jumping-off point to explore any number of fascinating questions from Jungian philosophy and the nature of dreams through to the relationships between mothers and sons, between brothers, between therapist and client — not to mention questioning our firmly held belief in the linearity of time.

His narrator's first-person voice maintains a good balance between skepticism and a willingness to at least explore the possibility that there is more to the world than first appears. The supporting cast ranges from Donnelly's very down-to-earth brother through to an intelligent little red bird named Imish and the inventor Saul who lives backward through time — sort of like Merlin in T.H. White's *The Sword in the Stone*. But it turns out that the more madcap characters are fairly sane while the others like Donnelly's brother and

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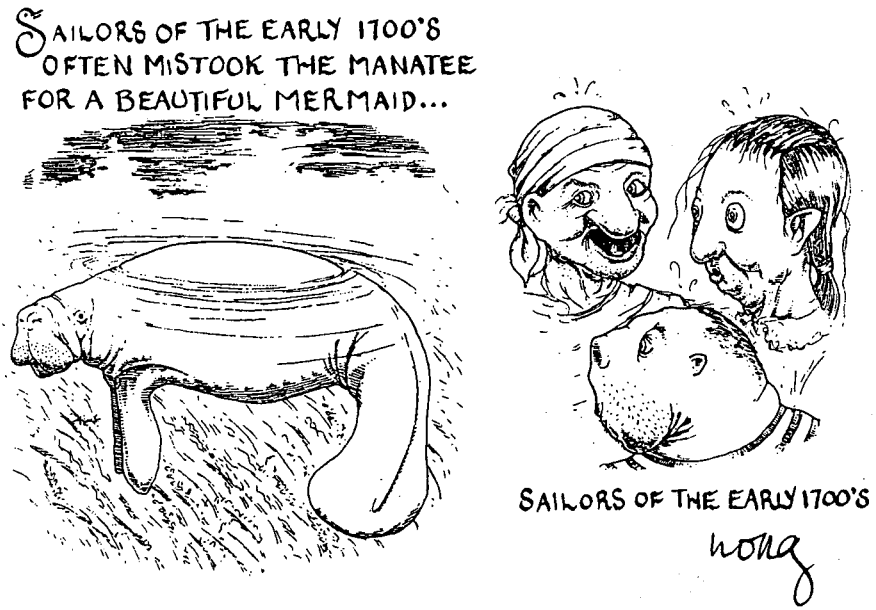
mother have deep secret lives that flood through the narrative. And if the story's linear sequence jumps about a bit, perhaps that's only to be expected considering how O'Leary plays with the idea of time. Like a Chinese puzzle box, every time you think you know what's happening next, O'Leary puts a new twist on what went before and ups the stakes.

The heart of this story is a refreshing trust in the worth of the human animal, coupled with a sense of hope that not only can we make sense of the confusion in which we find ourselves floundering, but we can change it for the better. It's a rare book that can be comic and serious, thoughtful and gripping, all at once. Rarer still that such a book is as good as *Door Number Three*. The hardcover edition might have disappeared by the time this review sees print, but the paperback should be out fairly soon. Put in an order for it at your favorite bookseller and I assure you, you won't regret it.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.



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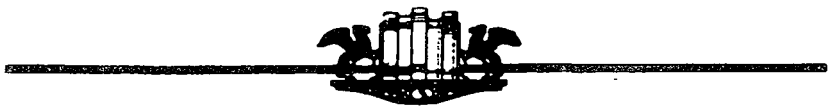

BRIEF REVIEWS: BOOKS

The Time Ships, by Stephen Baxter, Harper, 1995, 520pp, $5.99, Paper

IF YOU'VE ever wondered what became of H.G. Wells's Time Traveler after the events described in *The Time Machine*, then this book is for you. It picks up right where Wells left off, and tells of the inevitable return to the time of the Morlocks and the Eloi to rescue the beautiful and innocent Weena from her horrible death at the hands of the underground demons.

Yet this is only the beginning of a long, long tale. Five hundred and twenty pages of Victorian prose is a daunting prospect, but happily the Victoriana is only added for flavor, and most of the manuscript is nearly transparent reading. It follows the Time Traveler through an unlikely partnership with an advanced Morlock scientist as they visit parallel worlds, voyage all the way back to the beginning of the universe, and confront the architects of Eternity. At times *The Time Ships* reads more like a travelogue than a novel, but its incredible world-building and attention to modern physics and cosmology makes every port of call equally fascinating. A must-read for time travel fans of any era.

Cradle of Splendor, by Patricia Anthony, Ace, 1996, 293pp, $22.95, Hardcover

This book has many elements of a good sf near-future suspense-thriller: exotic locale (Brazil), an international cast of complex characters with tortured pasts, big secrets (some involving antigravity and UFOs), big events (war), and wonderfully observed small details. The writing is fine most of the time, and occasionally brilliant.

Yet the book is difficult to get into — maybe the characters aren't introduced properly, don't present enough of themselves to the reader

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early enough to make the reader care; maybe the viewpoint jumps around a little too much, and breaks in places without enough built-up suspense. The author's excellent research is evident, and her capsule news summaries are deft and accurate, but overall, this book is a ride in the park rather than a roller-coaster.

The Ganymede Club, by Charles Sheffield, Tor, 1995, 352pp, Hardcover

In *The Ganymede Club*, Sheffield presents a textured canvas of history (originated in his earlier novel *Cold as Ice)* on which to paint his story. Ultimately, it adds little to this tepid mystery set in a colonized outer solar system, and contributes much to the slow (despite a possible-murder and a mystery in the first chapter) and unfocused opening. The book takes most of a hundred pages to find its protagonist. At that point, things pick up.

The Ganymede Club is not without its pleasures. Sheffield is a smooth, competent storyteller, and the scope of his complex future history is admirable. *The Ganymede Club* may serve as an enjoyable light read for fans of hard, off-planet sf, but it fails to achieve its true potential, either as mystery or sf.

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Kathe Koja has one of the most distinctive voices in the science fiction field. Her most recent novel, Strange Angels, *has won acclaim from all quarters, including the mainstream press. In this story, Kathe explores the poet Sylvia Plath, who wrote about her suicide attempts in her poem "Lady Lazarus." Plath, considered the best poet of her generation, eventually did commit suicide at the age of thirty.*

Kathe writes, "Sylvia Plath is a great favorite of mine: genius and ferocity, a pure velocity of attack; what might she have done with those years since her death! The famous quote from A. Alvarez — 'Poetry of this order is a murderous art'— dovetails with Robert Lowell's summation, in the introduction to Ariel: *'Her art's immortality is life's disintegration.' But I prefer Nabokov in* Pale Fire: *'We who burrow in filth every day may be forgiven perhaps the one sin that ends all sins.'"*

Lady Lazarus

By Kathe Koja

THE MAISONETTE WAS COLD, had been cold, it was cold all over London in this winter where every pain was shaped and clear and made of purest ice. Hands on the table, hands on her head, flat hands with palms as still and cold as sarcophagus marble, my Christ was she going to cry again? No. No. She would not cry for him or anyone, bastard, *bastard* and *her*, that woman, she hoped they both died, spending her money in Spain, she hoped they were both dead. The children were asleep; she had just checked them, dim peaceful faces and they did not know about their father, did not know they were better off without him, better off if he were dead.

Ach, du.

Like voices in her head, auditory hallucinations. She did not have them; shock treatments, yes, but she did not have voices in her head or if she did it was poetry's own voice, not the muse but the bloody angel that flies behind it, no hands at all but talons springing bright as broken bones from the seamless flesh of its arms. She had written three poems this week, might write three more; or thirty; they would make her name, she had written that

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to her mother. Long letters to her mother like blood trailing on the floor, blood on the ice freezing like jelly and she with a stick to pick it up, messing it back and forth in divination and someone — her husband? her father? — pushing the stick from her hands, her cold hands empty again and the stick snapped in half like a broken bone, its lines like runes, instructions in dark angles so subtle and opaque that no one could fail to understand. Voodoo dolls, magic mirrors broken in slivers and slats like the gates of hell, the gates of heaven, all of it power and glory but who had the power, really, and the glory that comes with it like stink comes with shit, who? Not her, there at the table, not her with her head in her hands.

It was two thirty in the morning, temperatures falling cold as old stones, old black stones and she had been trying to write, write a new poem about old black stones. The rooms were clean and quiet; toys and clothes in order, kitchen clean, three cups and one tray of uncooked muffins lying like sacrifice on the minuscule counter. She thought she heard her neighbor stir, downstairs; she thought she heard the baby breathe, his whole pink body one susurrating whisper; thought she heard her daughter sigh in the midst of a dream. Little girls are born with dreams, curled needs inside like little eggs waiting to drop, fall fat like fruit, like the seeds of babies; but they don't need them. What they need are weapons, armies; they need to *be* armies, they need to be able to fight. Little boys are taught how to do that; it is a knowledge assumed as necessary as knowing how to point your penis when you piss. Learn how to fight, hit, throw stones, black stones like pennies on her eyes, she would lie in a grave like a trundle bed and who would care then? Not him.

Her hand on the paper like automatic writing, like using the planchette, its little needle the pointy nose of some feared pet, grave weasel, ferreting out the damned: you, and you. And you, especially; you didn't think we would forget *you*. She had been writing, trying to write since midnight, since two; she had talked to her neighbor, his face swarming out of the light belowstairs like some bewildered god, a modern god left without magic in the normal miracle of electricity. She had wanted to borrow some stamps; he had asked her if she was all right: "You aren't really well, are you?" *Are* you? Did he see somewhere in her face the shadow of the stones, did he see black spots left behind, little cancerous spores like pits left burned by feet made of acid, what did he see? There on the paper before her, the word, spore; or was it spoor? How cold it was in here, it was hard to see the paper, harder still to hold the pen. I'm fine, she had said; don't call the doctor, I'm fine.

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So many doctors; this new one was not bad, he seemed to understand, so many pressures on her and he seemed to understand: work, and the children; the paralytic cold. Of her other difficulties, of her husband and that woman, he was sympathetic, he was not unkind. Again and again he reminded her of her children, of her friends, her mother and brother, the people who cared: like an army of love, massed around her to give her strength. She needed strength, now more than ever; given at times to anger but at heart she was not a fighter; better, perhaps, if she had been. Little girl dreams; and flung stones; it was cold enough to freeze stones in here, sacks of ice split open to show like a pearl the motionless heart.

She had always hated the cold. Little girl days, watching the ocean; the spray like the sparkle of weapons, tips of arrows shining in the sun. Her dead father underground, no light for him. She felt her hand move across the paper, felt the pen as if it were another finger, sweet and special deformity; it was her talent, her genius, it was what allowed her to write. Did everyone have something like that, some rich handicap that in paradox freed its host? Her husband, what was his deformity? A penis that hissed like a snake, a fat red snake with one hot eye? and *hers*, what was hers, patent-leather bitch with her heavy scent and her voice like a man's, what did she have that made her special? Besides him?

Her hand distracting, moving again and she read the line aloud to herself like honey on the tongue: read it again but softly, she did not want to wake the children, wake her neighbor belowstairs; he needed his sleep. She needed sleep, too, but she needed this more.

Black stones, the poem told her, were in essence secret monuments to suffering, scattered across the unforgiving earth as grave markers for sadnesses and sorrows yet to be: and the job of each to find and gather the stones belonging to him, to her, to pile them in a cairn that was itself a monument to the human capacity for self-inflicted pain. And what — pen in hand and in the dark, what is in your pile, what lies in half-completion waiting agonies to be?

The baby made a noise; a car passed outside. Her bladder ached lightly and she stood for a moment, one hand on the chair's back, the other on her own, pressing where the pain seemed to be. So many pains below the surface; so many spots she could not reach. On the chair, draped like mockery the party dress, blue bodice glittering false and sweet; she looked away; she looked down. Sitting in the car, hands in her lap she had been sitting in the

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car and suddenly there was her neighbor, knocking on the window, was she all right? People were always asking her that; was she? The blue bodice tight as a secret against her heart and she had told him she was fine, then too, just fine; I'm thinking, she had said. I'm going on a nice long holiday, a long rest. She might have said, I'm going off to war; for war you need weapons; perhaps that was in the poem, too, hidden like a snake in the pile of stones. So many stones.

Here a stone for her father's death, dark sugary light surrounding it like infrared; red-eyed and eight years old, she had composed a document for her mother to sign: I WILL NEVER MARRY AGAIN. What a big stone that was, yet unheavy; without trying she could lift it with the bent tip of her nail. Beside it another stone for her mother, a small one shaped like a kidney; and a smaller stone still, for a baby unborn.

More — so many? — for men, most so small her own sad contempt might have goaded her into overlooking them had she not stumbled, stubbed her toes (like her father, in fact, before her, and what were those red marks creeping like unhealed scars up her legs?), understanding like a job begun in the vertiginous moment that these stones too were hers to carry and to keep. In her hands they were not so heavy, though walking in the cold made them more so, the long cold shadow born of the darkness of the biggest stone of all. That one she deliberately sidestepped, big and black as a monument itself, heavy as the weight of his body in the dark; it was, she thought (and said; did she say it aloud?) no longer hers to carry: let *her* carry it instead, the covetous bitch, let her bear the burden now.

Other stones — the *New Yorker* disappointments, the O'Connor class, all of it now as if seen from a painless distance, yet the edges of each stone still shone with a particular and vindictive clarity, as if they had been freshly sharpened not an hour before. Newer rejections (as *he*, the bastard, was basking in light) made their own pile, their own deadly memorial heap and beyond them more, a field of them, a waterless strand: her poverty, her loneliness, even the cold made a carpet of black all the way to the horizon, an endlessness like the tears of the dying, of those who die alone. Despairing of bearing them, she let fall the ones in her arms; there were too many, it was all too much, an army equipped with a pile this big, fierce black edges like excised teeth and the world itself one howling mouth, velvet-dark like the jaws of a guard dog, slick and scentless, dangerously cold.

You could burn to death, in cold like that.

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The baby began whimpering in earnest; she rose, back twingeing, to check on him, moving quiet and surely as upon the surface of a lake, frozen water slick and hard as promises, depthless as the edge of the knife, the smile in the darkness, the heavy scent of gas.

Now it was three thirty, quarter to four; she had thought of making coffee, tea, something hot but in the end the poem held her, kept her cramping hands busy. What if — head to one side, sinusitis ache but she was too busy, now, to notice — what if there were a way to make of the stones more than monuments, what if instead they were weapons, but weapons to be used on others rather than self? And take the step, not a long step at all, a logical motion to make of the stones themselves an army, who was it sowed the dragon's teeth? She did not remember, English major, Smith girl, she should remember. Perhaps the poem itself was a stone. Perhaps it was her stone, perhaps she ought to throw it at someone, good and hard, no secret about *that* and she almost laughed; or did she? Did the baby stir? Sweet baby, sometimes it was so hard to look after him, to look after them both; fatherless woman with her fatherless children, alone on a plain of black stones. Set the children down awhile, give them your flesh on which to sleep, to make a carpet keeping them from the cold; she loved her children; it was so hard.

The pen in her hand moved a moment; she ignored it; stubbornly it moved again and the stones shifted, now they were a path, built deliberate and strong for the wheels of iron, the chariots of the queen: warrior queen, and what a grand tradition that was, bare breasts and hair like eagles, their very gaze enough to split a rock, split the boulders in their paths and beside them the men, running, panting, trying to keep up. They knew, those women — with a smile, there was no denying it, a smile there in the sober light — they knew all about war, about tactics and plans, about ways to thwart the enemy even when he lies beside you (and how he lies); they were not fooled, they were not afraid. It was crippling, fear, debilitating as the cold; it *was* cold, fear, like a stone on your heart. A warrior queen, what would she do? smash the stone, or the heart it breaks? Smash your head open like a stone, and let the cold brain bleed out like jelly through the cracks.

Tired, now, of thinking, the brief exhilaration making her instead ready to weep, like the false gaiety of alcohol, giddy champagne nerves, when had she last drunk champagne? When had she last had reason? To friends she had determinedly crowed in false bravado of her newfound escape from the

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suffocation of pure domesticity, she was free now, she was doing what she had always wanted to do; her work was tremendous in its new liberation, well that was true, these poems were the best of her life. Her life: what else? Again her thoughts circling, thinking of him, then of her baby boy, a little tyrant too to one woman, one day? — or more, her mouth turning down again, long tragedian's mask but subtle, subtle, she had suffered so long she knew how it was done, without fanfare, without tears if possible, certainly without the long distorting grimace; a pale frown would do as well, as well. What *about* him, this boy-baby, her son? and what about her daughter, plump toddler's cheek and trusting eyes, innocent of the need for weapons, she did not even guess there was a war. How to look at such innocence, both of them, neither of them knew a thing about men and women, love and envy, the way it feels when the black millstone grinds against your heart, the way it feels to breathe blood and call it air. How to keep them safe, how to save herself? how to *understand*, these stones so real she could feel them, feel them in her hands like Medusa's breasts, big, contemptuous and cold. She put her hands to her face and did not cry, but felt somewhere — in the gripe of her belly, the somber turn of the blood in her womb — the tears, rolling, turning like acid in a vase, the shivering sea undrowned by all the stones in all the world.

And how could she change that?

Finished, now, with the poem; done thinking and her hands loose and empty on the table, pen down and paper folded; she had left a note downstairs, pinned to the hallway pram. No solution but an elegance of decision, there was calm in a decision, a space delicious as the pure moments post-fever where the scorched body can relax for a heartbeat's minute before taking up the sterner work of health. She knew what needed to be done, as surely as any warrior queen, sure as the wheels of chariots grinding sparks from the stones below.

Turning on the gas, hand on the dial like the hand of the angel who opens at last the book of life, the silent seeping odor and she bent, half-kneeling, to the door, one toweled hand to steady her motion — she was so tired, up all night and she was so tired — the other past her bending head, bending as if in benediction to slip into growing warmth the metal tray of muffins, breakfast for the children, for herself: hard little pumpernickel muffins like black stones to be heated till they were soft; and warm; and ready. She filled the three mugs with milk; already it was light outside.

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"Chasing Butterfly Shadow" is the first of two stories we have from novelist Nancy Springer. Nancy has published nearly two dozen novels, and countless short stories. She has won a Joan Fassler Memorial Book award for her children's book, Colt.

About this story, she writes, "In my experience, very old people, like very young children, are cognitive aliens to the rest of us. I think this is not because they are 'losing it' but because they are on their way outa here, one foot in another world. 'Chasing Butterfly Shadow' is my attempt to depict a very old woman's different view of everyday experience."

Chasing Butterfly Shadow

By Nancy Springer

WHEN NONA GOES OUT TO get the mail, she takes the new dog with her, letting him run. He is a little thing, a sheltie, not a Lassie look-alike but just another brown hairy oblong, jaws worthy of a moray eel at one end, tail out of control at the other. Because of his plenitude of fur he appears cute, but when the people from the cinder-block church on the highway came knocking last night he turned all teeth and snarl. Nona held him back by the collar and let him speak for her. After the tract pushers went away she said, "Your mama raised you right, dog," and patted him and smiled for an hour. She has never liked tract pushers, trying to shove their religion down everybody's throat.

The mail is waiting in the box out by the road, a quarter-mile away. It will take Nona an hour to get there and back, but she does not mind. She has stayed thin and healthy, and she looks forward to the walk. That sort of thing is what keeps you going when you are ninety-five years old.

In the sandy front yard, between the twin palmettos, the big azalea bush is in full coral-pink bloom. Nona slowfoots toward it. The dog, who does not

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care about azaleas, busies himself sending a squirrel back where it belongs, to the perpetual twilight of the pine forest behind the house. But Nona peers ahead, perceiving an aureole of movement around the azalea and intimations of blue and yellow amid its glory of pink. When she reaches it she comprehends: the azalea is alive with butterflies, dozens of them.

"Dog, you got to see this!" Nona calls.

He comes running. Nona's son Bill did not want her to get another dog because of the expense, but when her friend Maisie called her from the pound and told her this one was going begging, she wasn't about to say no. It is Billy's problem if he worries too much about money. Her husband was the same way when he was alive, and that is why he paid the piper before he had to, she is sure of it. The man was penny wise and pound foolish. He let money run his life, never understanding there were things above and beyond.

Nona stands by the azalea studying the butterflies coming and nursing on it and going away again, the Yellow Swallowtails and Red Admirals and others she doesn't know, one kind velvet black with a blue fringe, another sort tawny with white leopard spots. The dog bounces up to her, then rears like a pony with excitement. In the strong Florida sunshine, shadows of butterflies on the wing scud sharp and dark across the sand. The dog pounces on a flitting shadow with both forepaws, then jumps after it as it glides on, unaffected. His series of leaps follow the butterfly shadow across the yard until he loses it in the shade under the huge gray-mossed oak tree.

"Here!" Nona complains. "You never saw what I called you for."

He runs panting back to her, but immediately finds another shadow to chase, Pogo-stick fashion, across the yard. His spring-loaded zigzags make him appear more like a wind-up toy than the watchdog he is. Nona shakes her head at him.

"It ain't like that's a mouse or a rat," she tells him. "How would you even know if you caught it? It ain't real."

It is real enough to satisfy him. Nona walks on, heading toward her mailbox, but the dog remains behind, intent on chasing butterfly shadows.

The walk is long and slow but not hard. Most of the time Nona's lane lies under pine forest, so she is not out in the heat and glare. At the roadside, though, the sun beats down. Back in her yard, now, it will be making the azalea blaze like fire, like the burning bush of Moses, and the butterflies will be going up like sparks into the sky. Nona has trouble with the catch on the

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mailbox, but eventually conquers it. The contents are worth her effort: a Fingerhut catalog, a Carol Wright coupon packet, and a bright red-white-and-blue envelope that declares, "You Have Been Selected for Grand Prize Eligibility." When Nona's daughter, Lois, gets the mail, there is never anything good in it, just bills. Nona suspects that Lois sorts out the interesting things and hides them under her car seat before she drives back up the lane. She has never asked, and certainly she will not go open Lois's car and look, but she feels sure this is true. There has been no good mail since the day the Visa bill came and Lois saw it and was aghast and cried out like somebody snakebit.

"Six thousand dollars, Mother!"

"It is just money," Nona said.

"Just money! Why, Mother, don't you realize, you could be paying on that forever and never get anywhere!"

Nona does not care. "Forever" takes on a different meaning when you are ninety-five, when each day is a pearl strung on a necklace that has its ends way out of sight, up in eternity somewhere.

Anyway, Lois is away today, and Nona has gotten the mail by herself, and feels exalted. She walks back to the house, taking her time, watching the little longtailed garter-striped lizards whisk off the sunny spots in the lane and out of her way. When she gets home, clouds have come out of somewhere and covered the sun. No more butterfly shadows. The dog is sitting by her front door like a locked-out child.

Nona lets him in, lays her mail on the kitchen table to be enjoyed over lunch, and finds the big butterfly book. It is getting old, like her. Its green cloth cover is frayed, but its color plates are as bright as ever. She opens it and almost immediately identifies the leopard-spotted butterfly as a Gulf Fritillary, but then forgets to look up the elegant black one with blue borders. Her researches stray to the tropical butterflies with their iridescent colors, their strangely shaped wings. There are pictures of butterflies from Burma, Paraguay, the Solomon Islands, the Ivory Coast, Ceylon. Faraway places.

She will clear the owl figurines off the mantel, she decides. Owls are not so wise. Probably they worry about money. She will give the owls away, and start collecting porcelain butterflies, if there is such a thing. Perhaps the Franklin Mint has something. It does not have to be the actual butterflies. It can be butterfly vases, or mugs, or prints.

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Not quite accidentally Nona leaves the butterfly book lying out and open. She is feeling just a little weightless, lightheaded — it must be time for something. Lunch, that's what. Lunch, and her mail. She makes her way into the kitchen, where she microwaves herself Cup-A-Soup. When she sits, the dog lies at her feet and does not pester to be fed. He has good manners. Strange that such a nice dog should end up at the pound.

As Nona eats she opens the brightly colored envelope, looks at its brochure — turquoise-blue Caribbean seas, an Aztec festival in Mexico — and sends off her Grand Prize Entry at once, sticking her tokens on squares that say "Five-Piece Cordovan Luggage Set" and "World of Wonders Encyclopedia" and putting the cost on her MasterCard, since the last time she tried to use the Visa she was told it was full. She seals the envelope and stamps it from the postage supply she keeps on the table right along with the sugar. The great-grandchildren are coming over this afternoon, and they will be glad to mail it for her and not tattle to the adults.

She opens the lovely parcel-brown Carol Wright envelope and looks through the offers. A 1248 Piece Personalized Stationery Set, only $7.95. Nona has never understood why they call it that, stationery. It's like writing letters means you're not going anywhere. Limited Edition Endangered Species Decorator Plates — they are nice, but they are not butterflies. She is looking for butterflies. Lose Weight Overnight Vitamin E Nighttime Diet — she does not need that, she has always been thin enough to blow away. Cascade Dishwashing Detergent For Spotless Dishes Sweepstakes. She is just about to read the Easy Directions, Enter Now, No Purchase Required, when she sees on the next page: Breakthrough In Technology! Indoor TV Dish Antenna, only $19.95.

Now that is something worthwhile. When she was a youngster, which somehow seems closer all the time instead of farther away, the only way to go anywhere was by horse and buggy, Heaven was the half-day trip to the county seat for the Fourth of July, and all the glory was yet to come, the automobiles and paved roads, radio and television, the great airships, trips into space. But now they can bounce signals off artificial stars — at least they look like wandering stars overhead at night, because she saw one once, Bill showed her, and that was what it was like, a spark of light moving through the sky. And now they can send brightwing pictures from the far side of the world straight to her house. She wants to be linked to the stars and the sky,

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part of whatever is big and far away. At once she writes out a check, seals and stamps its envelope and puts it in the napkin holder with the other.

Billy will be coming soon to drop off his grandchildren. She will have to look at the Fingerhut catalog later. For now, she slides it under the corduroy seat cushion of a kitchen chair, where nobody is likely to notice it.

She hears the station wagon drive in. The dog jumps up. "Now, you don't have to bark," she tells him. "These people are family."

He barks a little anyhow, but not the way he did at the tract pushers yesterday. Bill walks past him with a sour look, but the children become loud and happy.

"What's his name?"

"Grammaw, can we walk him?"

She makes them wait till Bill is gone, then gives them the letters to mail. They go off with the dog on a leash, as she is not sure he will come when they call him if he gets distracted in the woods, and he might not know his way home yet. Next time they can let him run. Nona doesn't like to keep a dog in a pen or on a leash or a chain. Things were meant to be free.

"Hey, Gram." It is the oldest one, the teenager, who has stayed behind to separate himself from the little kids. "Did you hear the one about the dyslexic atheist? He didn't believe in Dog."

"That's not nice," she tells him. In fact she does not understand his joke, but she would not have laughed anyway. Seems like she' s on a different wavelength than most people these days. Hardly anything anybody can say makes her laugh aloud anymore.

She puts the teenager to work packing away porcelain owls. He is still grumpily at it when the other children get back, their bluejay voices flying in the windows long before they come in the door.

"Grammaw, this dog is stupid!"

"Grammaw, you know what your new dog did? He tried to fight Bubba!"

She hardly listens to the details of the encounter with a neighbor's Doberman pinscher, of how the children had to drag the sheltie away so he would not get himself hurt.

"He's not stupid," she tells them stiffly when they are done. "He's just full of piss and vinegar."

"He acts *dumb*! He wants to chase cars."

"He wants to chase *everything*!"

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The dog, freed from the leash and stimulated by the commotion, demonstrates by whirling after his own wayward tail. The children laugh, but Nona cuts them short.

"Go look at my azalea," she tells them. "It's loaded with butterflies."

They run out, and so does the dog. The sky is still clouded over, but in a few moments it clears, the sun starts to shine again, and Nona hears the children shouting, "Grammaw! Come out, you got to see this!"

"I know what he's doing," she mutters into a box of owls. "He's chasing shadows."

"Grammaw! You sure this dog came complete with a brain?"

"Yeah! Maybe he was Some Assembly Required — "

" — and they forgot to put one in."

Suddenly the dog starts to bark as if the tract pushers are coming back again, and Nona gets up from her owl packing and goes out as quickly as she can, which is not very, not at her age. But the children have things well in hand. One of them is holding the dog by the collar, and he is snarling, and Lois is there, getting out of her cute little car. It is no wonder the dog is raging at her. There is anger all around her like a dark halo. She carries two envelopes in her hand.

"Mother," she says, "what in the world are you thinking of? After all you've spent already. What do I have to say to make you listen? You've gone through everything Daddy left you. Bill and I are not made of money. How do you expect us ever to pay off the charges you're running up?"

Lois has hardly raised her voice, and she does not swear, not ever. Nona raised her right. But she is scolding her mother in front of the children, and she has never done that before.

Nona keeps her head up. "Those envelopes are supposed to be in the mail," she tells her daughter. "What are you doing taking mail out of my mailbox?"

"I thought I'd stop on my way home and bring you your mail, that's what. And then I find these. Mother, you just can't. Don't you remember all the so-called prizes you've sent for already? Hundreds of dollars wasted. Thousands, by the time we get done paying." She holds up the other envelope. "And what's this for?"

"An indoor TV antenna." That isn't quite accurate, and doesn't begin to do justice to the glory of the thing, but Nona is rattled. The way the dog is carrying on shows how furious Lois really is. Nona never realized before.

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Lois cries, "*A TV antenna*? What possessed you? You have a perfectly good antenna already."

"Oh, rip them up if you want," Nona says, jerking her chin at the envelopes. "It doesn't matter." This is probably true. In the long view, the sky view, it probably does not matter at all.

"It matters that you — would somebody *please* get that dog out of here?" Lois waits until the children comply, taking refuge in the house. Then she goes on more quietly. "It matters that you don't seem to understand about your situation. Mother, I don't know what to do with you. You're healthy, I know you want to keep living in your own home, but how can you if.... How in Heaven's name can you be so sharp about everything else and so dense about money?"

She sails into the house, calls Bill, arranges to take the children home to save him a trip. "I will pick up your mail tomorrow," she tells Nona as she leaves. After everyone is gone, Nona hears the silence ringing like great soundless bells.

She ought to put the owls back on the mantel, but does not. Instead she speaks to the dog, who waggles his ears attentively at her. Lord only knows what he is thinking, but that doesn't mean he is dumb. It is just that his thoughts run in ways that are strange to her. "You are *not* stupid," she tells him. "Don't listen to them."

The house seems dark and small to Nona. She goes outside for a little walk, taking the dog with her. He darts straight to the azalea bush, and much more slowly she follows.

It is getting late in the day. The sun is low, the butterflies are sated, they fly sluggishly if at all, and their shadows on the sand are dim. One hazy skimming shape goes past; the dog pounces on it and springs after it a short distance, then comes back. He stands with ears quivering and pricked so high they nearly touch, waiting for another. The azalea bush glows like sunset, and the butterflies rest in its cloudy softness, slowly fanning their delectable wings. They are southern ladies in church, Nona decides, souls rocking in the bosom of Abraham.

The dog waits. No shadows skitter across the sand. Time passes, minutes collecting on God's necklace. The dog barks impatiently, then springs. Straight at a swallowtail on a lower branch he launches himself, snapping with those piss-and-vinegar jaws of his, jumping it to make it fly.

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Nona does not mind that he then chases the shadow instead of the thing itself. She is laughing out loud, and trying to leap into the air with her ancient, healthy body, and clapping her hands like the noisy clapping wings of a dove, because her dog is wise as angels. He knows. He knows what is real. He knows where the stars wander, he knows the color of glory, he knows how to qualify for the grand prize. He knows that above the butterfly shadow flies the butterfly.

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Laurel Winter's stories for F&SF have ranged from contemporary fantasy ("Permanent Natural Boy") to science fiction ("The Negotiator"). "Blood Harp" marks her first alternate world fantasy story for the magazine.

About the story, she writes, "I attended a Rochester Symphony concert with a friend and the wordless sensory stimulation inspired a flood of word ideas, including one for a 'blood harp.'" She turned that idea into the haunting story which follows.

Blood Harp

By Laurel Winter

KEMMELIN CROUCHED NEXT to a mirror-smooth bench on the upper tier and rubbed viciously with her polishing cloth. Marja was practicing again — if you could call it that, her long fingers so far from the blood harp's strings that Kemmelin could easily have fit her own fingers in the space between them. When *she* had practiced in her home village — on a lesser blood harp, not one of the great harps like that rising from the stage below — her fingers had almost grazed the sharp and hungry strings.

Kemmelin played a simple tune in the air, her eyes mere slits. How would such a song sound on the great blood harp? She imagined the strings slicing her fingertips, the harmonics as the blood dripped down to feed the heart of the harp, the —

The old woman's hard leather shoe nudged her leg. "Clean the benches. And the relief rooms." Then she limped down the wide steps to the stage.

Kemmelin looked at the polishing cloth, abandoned on the smooth wood of the bench. The old woman was instructing Marja on her practicing

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techniques; the sound of their words reflected upwards in the great bowl of the room. Kemmelin could hear them clearly from where she knelt, as clearly, she knew, as from any other position in the blood hall.

Marja was showing the old woman her scar, which hadn't healed well yet. The old woman offered no sympathies. "Try the baths — after you finish practicing. And you must be nearer." She grabbed one of Marja's hands and moved it close to the strings. "Like so. You cannot fear the harp or the music will be flawed. Yet you must respect it." This last she said more firmly.

"I do respect it." Kemmelin's cry was swallowed by the design of the room. All the same, she had the strange feeling that the old woman knew what she had said — and didn't believe her.

She breathed in the musty-sweet smell of the hall, more scented by fungus than blood, and clenched her eyes shut. When she opened them again, the old woman was just approaching the entrance to the bath caves, below the stage. Marja had begun practicing again, tears glittering on the dramatic planes of her face, her fingers held at a more respectable distance from the strings. "But not as close as I would hold them," Kemmelin whispered.

She left the cloth on the bench for later and went to clean the relief rooms. Later, when Marja had gone to the baths to soak her skin tender, and the blood harp was alone on the stage, she could finish the benches.

The old woman had Kemmelin stand at the entrance past the time Marja was supposed to start playing. No use. Only a third of the gleaming benches were occupied. Kemmelin let the coin she had taken from the last concert-goer fall into the slot of the box that was chained to the wall. Only the old woman had the key, but the girl knew that the coins nestled at the bottom were hardly worth stealing.

A grizzled head peeked into the entry, took in the situation. "You might as well come in," she said.

Kemmelin didn't hurry. When she entered, Marja was well into the first piece, a sweet melody that didn't demand much blood. Even then, she seemed to be holding back from the harp, her fingers darting in to the strings and away again, too quickly. It was hard to tell, since Marja was wearing the traditional red robe of the blood harpist, but the lack of deeper harmonics that would have made the piece strong as well as sweet convinced Kemmelin that Marja had shed even less blood than the minimal amount the song required.

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The concert didn't get better. Marja shied away from the biting touch of the strings — even on her finale, a piece that cried out for a lingering stroke to feed the wood and bones of the heart. Without that, the harp didn't release the wild burst of sound at the end. There was an abrupt, thin crescendo, and the concert was over.

Half the audience began to leave before the last note had even died. The other half drummed polite heels on the wooden floor while Marja held her arms up to them, her fingers barely stained. Kemmelin could tell she was forcing herself to complete the turn, to acknowledge everyone. Her sleeves had fallen back. A little blood trickled down one arm.

Kemmelin had been to one great concert in her life, four years earlier, shortly after her own blood had made her a woman. At the end of that one, the woman's arms gleamed red, and she staggered from loss of blood before she could even finish the circle. Kemmelin had drummed her heels numb — and she wasn't the only one. The whole hall seemed to reverberate as the audience drummed and drummed.

There was no comparison with this performance. The last drumming stopped the instant Marja finished her circle. Before she could even make her way to the baths, people were clambering up and out of the hall. Some were outwardly critical, but most seemed embarrassed for Marja. They avoided Kemmelin's eye as they passed her seat on the highest tier. Soon she was alone in the dimly glowing blood hall.

Alone except for the harp.

She walked down the wide, shallow steps, which she had swept clean earlier that day. Grit from the peoples' shoes grated under her feet, mingled with the dust and spores from the luminescent fungus on the ceiling that reflected the sound from the stage, as well as providing soft light.

She knew the harp could not have been satisfied — she was not. Down, down, past all seven tiers, until she was one step away from the smooth, stained wood of the stage itself.

She had never let herself come down before, always skirting around the stage at the lowest tier on her way to the baths. The old woman had warned her that she was not to play the harp; "You are too young, too ready to shed your life for music, with too much heat and not enough fear."

She had argued at the time, but the woman was adamant. Now was not the time; if she persisted, she would leave the blood hall and some other

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aspiring harpist would polish the benches and sweep the steps and clean the relief rooms until the old woman granted permission to play.

Kemmelin knew the old woman, knew her from her eyes and the set of her jaw. She meant it. She also knew herself: if she went near enough to the blood harp to touch it, she would play.

Until now, she had kept a barrier of benches between herself and the instrument. Until now.

The stage floor was as smooth as the benches, but the wood had never been oiled. Ancient blood stains, barely faded, mingled with the recent and the merely old. Stage floors were never cleaned. Not the modest wooden platforms like the one that held the lesser harp in Kemmelin's village. Not the imposing spaces that held the great harps. In the only other blood hall Kemmelin had seen, the stage was almost black. Here, the ancient record far exceeded the displays of the near past. A few splatters of blood — too few — from Marja's performance had yet to be absorbed.

Kemmelin avoided the wet streaks and spots. It wasn't difficult. She approached the harp.

I will just practice, she told herself, knowing that she was lying. She seated herself at the great harp and held her fingers just a feather's breadth from the strings. Her breathing came fast and ragged, audible — she knew — to the entire blood hall.

Carefully, still keeping the tiny distance, she began to practice the song she had played in the air earlier that day.

There was no sound but her breathing, as she did not make contact. Yet somehow the blood harp seemed to be throbbing, to beg for soft skin against its strings, for the flavor of her blood.

Without deciding to — and without deciding not to — she began to play. The harp led her in depth of touch by the depth of the harmonic response. The simple tune she had chosen was a good one, a song that resonated and gave itself to the harp and took back the harp's gift and rejoiced.

It was not a long melody, and she only played it once. The blood harp gave a last throb of music and then there was silence.

Kemmelin shook all over. She had played the blood harp. She looked at her fingertips, which were dripping blood from a score of tiny lacerations. No one would know, she realized. The blood she had added to the stage could have easily come from Marja's concert. She, Kemmelin, had bled almost as

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much — and she had only played one song.

She wiped her hands on the polishing rag, which was fortunately still in the pocket of her dress, and headed for the baths. Marja and the old woman were down there, she knew, but she could keep her hands balled up until she was in the water.

The bath caves were almost directly under the stage, but one had to spiral in to them. She soaked in the languid waters every day, to keep her skin soft and supple and ready for the bite of the blood harp. Today was the first day that the healing salts and minerals would be a factor. She took great breaths of the strangely scented air as she rounded the last corner. Just the smell of the water helped calm her a little.

Marja and the old woman were in the first bath, a dimly lit chamber with different height benches chipped out of the stone in the pool's sides. Marja sat on one end of the lowest bench, her hair, the color of dry grass at the end of a long summer, trailing into the water. The old woman sat on the higher bench that butted up against Marja's bench. She had twisted her gray hair up into a drying cloth. The water lapped at the top of her sagging breasts. Marja looked bleak, the old woman a curious mixture of proud and angry.

Kemmelin would have hurried past, into the second bath, a smaller, dingier chamber where she often soaked alone, but the old woman's voice cut through the dim air. "Join us."

Kemmelin turned away from them to struggle out of her dress, careful to keep her body between them and her hands. As quickly as possible, she slipped into the gently steaming water, gasping out loud as the suspended salts touched the open wounds on her fingers. The old woman held her gaze with fierce, dark eyes. How could she know? the girl wondered. The sharp pain became a tingling numbness.

The old woman seemed to make a point of bringing her own mutilated hands up into the air. One hand was missing two fingers, the other three. Both were horribly scarred. Other, lesser scars traveled up her arms. Those, Kemmelin knew, were from feeding the harp if there was too long between performances. But the fingers — the old woman had obviously been a blood harpist herself, years ago. A great harpist on a great harp, losing herself to the music to such an extent that she lost fingers. Not once, but five times.

Kemmelin had always known these facts, but she hadn't let herself examine them before. She wondered how much blood one would lose if a harp

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string bit deep enough to cut off a finger. She wondered what sound the harp would make in response. And what music could so involve a harpist that such would be possible.

Without thinking, she raised her own hands above the surface of the water, stretching out her ten limber fingers. A drop of blood fell from one cut onto the surface of the bath. Kemmelin hastily submerged her hands.

Marja would not look at her. The old woman would not look away. If she hadn't needed the healing waters, Kemmelin would have grabbed her dress and run. How did they know?

She looked up at the low ceiling of the chamber, anywhere to escape the old woman's eyes. And then she knew.

The sound would not have been the clear perfection that it was in the blood hall above them, but it would have traveled, nonetheless, through stone and water, into the bodies and minds of the two below her.

She could not avoid a guilty glance at them now. The old woman nodded. "In the old days, when there were many harpists serving this harp, some would listen from here as they bathed. You can feel the music through your skin." Her gaze grew sharp as a harp string. "Tomorrow, or day after, when your fingers have healed enough, I will watch you play. Do not again play without my permission."

Kemmelin almost drowned on the smell of the air and the sound of the old woman's words. She was not going to be sent away. Marja still would not look at her. The three sat in silence for a long time, and then the two of them pulled themselves from the water and went away. Kemmelin was alone again, with the water and the stone above her head and the blood harp on top of that.

THE OLD woman did more than just watch her play. She made Kemmelin practice the same bit over and over again, fingers just a heartbeat away from touching the wires. "You will play that measure and nothing more," she finally instructed the girl, just as Kemmelin was deciding her fingers could not possibly move through the series of notes again, nor her throat hum them as she did. But the thought of *playing* gave her new strength and mobility.

The tender, half-healed wounds on her fingers broke when she had just begun. She pulled back.

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The old woman laughed and laughed. "So," she said, wiping tears from her eyes with stubs of missing fingers, "next time you will not be so contemptuous of poor Marja. It is one thing to imagine oneself as a great blood harpist. It is another to feel the pain of harp strings on sore fingers."

"But — in my village," Kemmelin said, "I — "

The old woman cut her off with a gesture. "In your village you had a lesser blood harp and every girl from a day's walk around wanted a turn at it. How often did you get to play?" Before Kemmelin could even begin to answer, the old woman continued. "I'll tell you how often — not very. Your fingers had plenty of time to heal. You know nothing of the life and pain of a harpist."

Kemmelin said nothing. She moved her hands toward the harp again, but the old woman stopped her. "Go to the baths, girl. When your fingers are sufficiently healed you will play again. Today was not a lesson in music. Show me your hands in two days and I will judge."

Kemmelin went to the baths sucking on the worst finger. That was what she had done in her village after a harp session, for her area had no healing baths. When she got home, she made up her own remedy in a bowl — or her mother did — and soaked her hands. But the warm mineral baths, to immerse one's whole body in, were much more satisfying than chipped pottery on a table. Coming out of the baths was like emerging from a dream.

The salty taste of her own blood was not unpleasant though, and the finger-sucking was strangely comforting, as if she were again a young child.

This time, Kemmelin was alone in the caves. She lit a small, long-burning torch in the first cave and went on. The mineral springs had played a strong role in the creation of the caverns, and almost every chamber held at least a small pool. The walls and ceilings glowed with occasional patches of fungus. Strange formations rippled from the rock, pillars and cones and thin, translucent lace. The mineral smell from the pools comforted her. Back, she went, and back, still sucking her fingers, the other hand holding the torch. Periodically, she would switch hands. As when she was a child, she felt the need for a place of her own, a secret place that no other knew of, a dark and quiet place.

After rejecting several sites, she found it.

Ages ago, the waters had carved a twisted tunnel in the side of one chamber. If one didn't examine it carefully, it appeared to be a dead end. But Kemmelin's fingers were aching for the springs; she had determined that she was going to turn back and take one of the other places if she didn't find the

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perfect spot soon. The idea of failure rubbed against the back of her eyes, so she was extra diligent in her search.

Through the tunnel — tall Marja would have had to hunch way over — the cave opened into a small chamber, almost like a bubble in the rock. Frills of lacy stone edged the opening. There was a small ledge, just inside the entrance, that would be a good surface for dry clothes and perhaps a sealed jar of food, but the rest of the floor was filled with a pool. Her torch cast wavering shadows over the smooth surface of the water. She set the torch handle into a hole in the curved wall that almost seemed made for it, stripped off her dress, and tested the pool for depth.

The floor of the cave curved naturally beneath the surface of the water until it reached a short drop-off. Kemmelin laughed out loud and slipped down into the water. Leaning back, she could rest the back of her head just outside the water, keeping her face dry. Her knees bent at the drop-off point, as if it were the edge of a bench.

The water stung her fingertips for a long moment. She held her breath until the relief of tingling began.

With the curve of walls and ceiling, she could imagine herself inside an egg. Like a mottle chick, she thought — no, a scarlet fantail. Much more satisfying to see oneself as a splendid, exotic bird rather than the dull fowl that pecked around in every yard. She had only seen fantail plumage once, in the hair of a fat wealthy woman who stopped at their village to have a carriage wheel fixed. The spread of scarlet feathers, tipped with deeper red and flecks of brilliant yellow, had made the woman's hair look drab.

Kemmelin sat up straight and waited for the waves from her movement to subside. In the torchlight she examined her reflection in the surface of the pool. Would a fantail drab her down?

No, she decided. Her hair was darker than the wealthy woman's had been, with reddish highlights that the scarlet would enhance. Her eyes were odd, with a darker rim of blue around pale, bluish-gray, but at least her lashes and brows were dark. Her skin was somewhere between Marja's paleness and the old woman's deeper bronze. And if there was nothing special about the shape of her face or the prominence of her cheekbones, there was nothing ill about them either.

"Someday," she told her reflection, which shimmered slightly as she spoke, "you will wear a fantail in your hair." And someday, she dared not say aloud, you

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will be a great blood harpist. She looked at the linear sores on the ends of her fingers and did not allow herself to think of the old woman's hands at all.

It was three days before the old woman pronounced her hands healed enough to play again. In that time, she was not even allowed to practice, because Marja claimed the harp and the old woman's attentions and spent most of her time — that not spent lying in a stupor in the second bath chamber — practicing her songs. Her humming voice was extraordinary, and of course she had a repertoire of music much greater than Kemmelin's. Her fingering was better now than it had been before the intensive practice, just barely skimming over the surface of the strings, but the girl still sensed a tension in the woman's posture whenever she was near the harp.

Kemmelin minded the wait less than she thought she would, because she was busy appropriating items for her chamber. Only things that wouldn't be missed, she thought: a green rug with a frayed edge, a pillow with a wine-stained cover, several half-burned torch inserts. The torches were the easiest part, as it was her job to change them when they burned out. It was a simple matter to change them early.

The food was the most difficult. Kemmelin felt guilty taking a large clay jar of dried meat and fruits from the back of the storage room. With the lack of concert money lately, supplies were dwindling. *So I will eat less of the food at the table,* she consoled herself. She sneaked the jar — wrapped in drying cloths — into the baths when the old woman was overseeing one of Marja's long practice sessions. The drying cloths she folded neatly in the first chamber, then hurried through the caves with the jar.

It was hard to stay away from her solitary place, hard to bathe in the chambers where Marja and the old woman bathed, and yet she did so, because she did not want them to become curious. If her hands healed well and she hadn't been seen in the baths, they would know she had been somewhere else.

No one had ever told her not to explore the caves, or said that she had to bathe in the regular places. The other two did so because it was easier. All the same, though, she wanted her place to be secret, so she maintained at least a portion of her former schedule of bathing and only slipped off to her hideaway when she thought she wouldn't be missed.

With extra exposure to the baths though, her fingers healed more rapidly than Marja's. "This will be good," the old woman said, holding one of

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Kemmelin's hands between a finger and an amputated stub. "I was going to feed the harp today anyway. You will have a lesson and then the harp will be ready for Marja's next concert when her hands are fully healed."

Kemmelin had been planning to go and eat a few handfuls of meat and fruit from the jar she had stashed — she had eaten very little of the stew that noon — but she forgot about that immediately.

The old woman was strict, teaching her a new song and making her hum it over and over, correcting the tempo frequently, before she even let Kemmelin practice in the air surrounding the harp. She had Kemmelin go over the fingering until her arms ached and there was a knot of tension at the base of her skull.

But she was learning the song. Her fingers knew — without her thought — when to dart and when to quiver and when to hold still and then plunge. "Yes," said the old woman. "Play now."

And Kemmelin played. She didn't even flinch when the harp strings cut her, releasing the first blood that made the harp's heart sing. The song was in her hands and in her own heart and in her blood. She barely noticed the redness flowing from her fingers. The pain she felt was echoed by the strangeness and joy that the blood harp added to the music. When she was done, exhausted, she let her hands drop to her knees, heedless of the blood dripping onto her dress.

The old woman had no smile for her, only a gaze that seemed not to quite see the girl — or perhaps to see a future self, a harpist. "To the baths," she said. "That will do for now."

Kemmelin didn't even think of dragging her body to her secret place. It was beyond her to get past the first chamber. She stepped into the water without even taking off her dress and — after the stinging stopped — examined her hands.

Most of the lacerations were superficial, but there were two deep cuts that ran diagonally down her center fingers, where the music had called for her hand to slide down a string. Those were beginning to throb. She made sure she was in a position where she wouldn't tend to slip farther in, then leaned her head back and fell asleep.

Marja woke her with a low voice and a long-fingered hand on her shoulder. "Kemmelin? You've been in the water long enough. Zaffrie says that you should eat."

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Eat sounded good, but something else caught her attention. "Zaffrie? Is that her name?"

Marja's left eyebrow rose. "You've been here a month and you don't even know your mentor's name? Shame."

"How was I to learn it," she snapped. "When I came, all I heard was, 'Can you polish? Can you sweep? Just maybe you will be allowed to play someday.'" Her voice trailed off. "There was no mention of names. I wouldn't have known yours if it wasn't for the poster."

Marja laughed, her shoulders shaking with the force of it. "Oh, I remember, I remember. Not 'can you carry a song?' but 'can you carry wood and water?'"

They laughed together and then Marja touched her shoulder. "Come out now. I'm sure your dress has faded and your skin turned to pucker fruit."

After the woman left, Kemmelin dragged herself from the water. As Marja had predicted, her dress was a muddy version of its former self. Kemmelin felt a bit muddy, too. Who could have known that the great harps were so demanding? And Marja had laughed with her! She must have known Kemmelin's attitude toward her playing. This life was going to be different than she had decided in her first month here.

She had no other clothes in the baths, so she just twisted as much water as she could out of her skirts and blotted her skin and hair with a drying cloth. Then, dripping, she plodded up through the blood hall and into the small area at the back where the three of them ate and slept.

Evenmeal was more of the stew she had barely touched at midday. She was so hungry her hand shook in guiding the spoon to her mouth. She ate and ate, continually adjusting the grip on her spoon handle to lessen the pain from the harp cuts. Nothing helped. Finally, she just gave up and ignored the throbbing. She felt a sense of community with the others that she had not felt before.

"Let me see," the old woman — Zaffrie — said, when Kemmelin had satisfied her appetite and let the spoon fall to the smoothly sanded table. The girl held out her hands.

Zaffrie's fingers and stubs prodded the wounds gently. "Nothing the baths can't handle," she said. "Take another before you sleep tonight. In two days — " she looked at them both in turn. "In two days, Marja will play again. I sent children to the villages with word. The blood hall must be well-cleaned."

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Kemmelin's good feeling evaporated. When Marja's fingers healed, she played before an audience. Kemmelin had to heal in order to polish benches and sweep up fungus droppings. She stood and displayed her hands. "I cannot clean the dishes tonight." Her damp dress slapped her legs as she turned and left the kitchen.

Even though she bathed again, in her chamber this time, Kemmelin had a hard time trying to fall asleep. Her center fingers ached. Her thoughts fought in her mind. Had Marja once been unafraid? Would she, Kemmelin, begin to pull back from the feel of the strings on real and remembered wounds? How long would she have to polish and clean and haul wood before she played before an audience?

There is never a night that doesn't end, even though some feel endless. At some point, worrying over her thoughts like knots in weaving, Kemmelin slept. She expected dreams of things left undone, but, if she did, morning hid them from her.

It did not hide the pain, though. Before she spared time to eat, she half-ran to the baths. She plunged her hands in and waited for the tingling before she briefly exposed them and stripped off her sleep shift. Then she was in all the way to her chin.

She would have stayed half the day, too, but she didn't want Marja to come looking for her again, or perhaps Zaffrie. After a time, she stepped out and dried off. It would be wise to begin the polishing and sweeping, she decided, since it was likely that her hands would not allow long sessions with cloth or broom.

In fact, Marja and the old woman — Kemmelin could not get used to thinking of her by name — had to help with the upper tier of benches or the blood hall would not have been ready in time.

Not that every bench was used. The gossip about Marja's last performance — and all three had heard it — was that she was worth listening to if one didn't have another plan, but not more than that. One might expect pleasant music, but no great shedding of blood. Kemmelin guessed, without keeping careful count, that there were about the same number in the audience as last time. Perhaps a few less.

When Marja had been helping polish benches though, already dressed in her red robe, she had been humming deep in her throat, as if the music were caught inside her. From time to time, she would drop the polishing cloth and

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practice a bit in the air, her fingers quivering with intensity.

This time, Kemmelin didn't linger when Zaffrie told her she could enter the blood hall. The audience was whispering as Marja approached the harp, which was poor manners, but not necessarily distracting to the harpist, since sound reflected up from the stage and not the other way around. All the same, it angered Kemmelin, who could hear her neighbors clearly.

"I saw her last time," said a man with a gray tunic, and hair that would soon match it. "Only a few spatters of blood. And the music — at least she's pretty."

"She's better to look at than hear, that's for sure."

The men's comments ceased, though, as soon as Marja began.

Music and blood poured from her hands. Some people drummed their heels in the midst of her songs, not able to wait. Their mouths hung open and many clenched their hands so tightly that their fingernails cut their palms. Blood trickled from fists. The music cut into their souls. Yes, Kemmelin thought, yes. The musty air was overlaid with the tang of blood and sharp, hungry sweat. And still Marja played, wild songs and sweet ones, songs that made toes tap and others that made a hundred eyes glitter. Yes.

Finally, she stood to acknowledge the audience. Kemmelin saw that her cheeks were white and as wet with tears as her arms were with blood. The heel drumming demanded a second circle, but Marja stumbled off toward the baths.

After the people quit drumming their heels and left, in quite a different mood than the last audience, Kemmelin practically flew down the steps, which were decorated by the blood of the people. This time she didn't stop at the stage, but rather followed the droplets that Marja had left behind on her way to the baths.

"Marja, that was wonderful! Beautiful!" she cried, as she burst into the first chamber. The red robe lay on the floor like a puddle of blood. Zaffrie knelt on the edge of the bath, holding Marja's hand under water. The younger woman was still crying silently, her mouth open and shaking. Her green-gray eyes were glazed with shock and pain.

Kemmelin went to the edge of the pool. The water looked pink. "What happened?" she whispered. Marja started to lift her hand, and, after a second, Zaffrie let her.

The tip of Marja's left smallfinger hung off to the side, almost severed at

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an angle. Kemmelin's stomach clenched. "Oh, Marja," she said. "But it was so beautiful." Zaffrie pushed the hand back down into the water and Marja's crying became vocal.

It was hard to read the expression on the old woman's face. Pain, yes, and a hardness that nevertheless didn't seem cruel. "It will pass," she said to Marja. "Did you hear your own music? Keep that in your heart — what is a finger, next to that music in your heart?"

Marja pulled away. Zaffrie stood up and pushed Kemmelin ahead of her, out of the chamber. "She needs time."

Kemmelin would rather have gone the other direction, to her private chamber, but she let the old woman guide her. She kept rubbing her own fingers together, wincing at the soreness, but unable to stop.

Zaffrie took her past the stage, through the blood hall, into the mundane warmth of the kitchen. The old woman shoved the girl toward a chair and let her sit, lacing and unlacing her fingers, while she pumped water into a kettle. "After a while, Marja will need some hot, sweet miro," she muttered. "Wouldn't do us any ill either." She put the kettle on and put another stick of resinwood in the belly of the stove.

Kemmelin was vaguely aware that she should help, but the sound of Marja's music and the picture of Marja's white face above the mutilated hand would not release her mind. "She has never played so well," she said.

"And never paid for it either," answered Zaffrie. "The two are linked." She looked for an instant at her own hands, which were awkwardly setting cups on a tray. "There are many blood harpers," she said, "with only scars. There are many more with a single finger missing."

Kemmelin asked the question. "How many lose more than one finger?" Her voice was no louder than the kettle, which was beginning to hiss.

"How many take the music into their blood, no matter how much blood they shed? Not many," Zaffrie said. "Not many at all."

Kemmelin played twice in next span of days, just to feed the harp, a single song and no more. Zaffrie had her practice though, when she was done with her other duties, since Marja still could not spend much time at the harp.

Marja had wanted the fingertip stitched back on, but Zaffrie dissuaded her with talk of infection and fever. "I have seen harpists lose a hand or a life because they would keep a finger," she told Marja. Kemmelin wasn't there

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when they took it the rest of the way off, so she wasn't sure how they did it. She didn't ask.

When Marja wasn't in the baths, she was soaking her finger in a deep, narrow cup that she carried with her. It came to be one of Kemmelin's jobs to empty the cup on a regular basis and refill it with fresh, healing water. Her own hands, dipped in the baths at such frequent intervals during the days, healed that much faster.

So did Marja's other, lesser wounds. At length, it was only the finger that prevented her from playing. And finally, that too was healed enough. Then it was only a matter of feeling the music rather than the fear.

"Think of the music," Zaffrie would demand, when Marja was practicing and seemed to hesitate. "The music."

At first, when Zaffrie said this, Marja just stiffened, but after a time, she apparently began to hear the music in her heart. Kemmelin, watching from the upper tier, could almost hear Marja's heart music — it was there in the movement of her fingers and the throbbing hum in her throat.

At last, it seemed that Zaffrie too could hear. "I will send the children," she said. "A concert in three days. Will that be long enough for you to clean the blood hall, girl?"

Kemmelin stuck her lips out in a teasing fashion. "Perhaps," she said. "Perhaps."

In three days, the blood hall shone. After Marja's last performance — and especially since it had been so long between — Kemmelin was sure that people would come like followdogs. And so they did. A few even had to sit on the steps, on pillows hastily snatched from a back storage room and pounded free of dust.

It was time, but Marja had not appeared. "I will look in the baths." Zaffrie's voice hissed in Kemmelin's ear as they handed pillows to the last comers. "You see if she is in the kitchen or the sleeping quarters."

Kemmelin ran. The kitchen was empty. She turned to check the sleeping quarters, but before she could go, there was a small sound from the storeroom.

"Marja?" she called.

Marja stepped into the doorway, her eyes glittering. She was not wearing the red robe, but rather an old tunic and brown leggings, her autumn-grass hair concealed in a faded blue scarf. No one who met her would see a red-robed blood harpist. She held up her healed hands to stop Kemmelin's words.

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"I can't," she whispered.

"Yes, you can," Kemmelin said fiercely. "I've heard you and seen you. You can."

Marja let her hands fall. She picked up a sack from a shelf and started past the girl.

Kemmelin grabbed her arm. "I've heard the music in your heart."

Marja pulled loose. "And have you felt the pain there — the fear." She stuck her smallfinger into Kemmelin's face, so close the girl had to step back to focus on it. "How long could I keep playing? How many fingers can a blood harpist lose before — " She dropped her hand. "There must be another life I can live. If I can do without the baths...."

The baths? Not the harp and the music? How could the calming water mean more than the bloody clamor of song escaping from one's fingers and soul?

Kemmelin made to speak, but Marja wouldn't let her. "I cannot play with this fear inside. I will not play poorly again." Her voice was fierce with passion, but she did not allow any expression to twist her pale, dramatic features.

This time Kemmelin let her go, slipping through the back door into the small, dusty garden. Before the door swung shut again, Marja had stepped over the garden fence and into the world.

The audience moved restlessly on their benches; Kemmelin could hear them clearly through the wall that separated the living area from the hall. Just as clearly, she seemed to hear the silent hunger of the harp.

Through the door of Marja's sleeping chamber, she saw the corner of the red robe, which lay abandoned on the floor. She went in and picked it up.

Marja was a good head taller than she was. When she put on the robe it dragged at the floor and swallowed her hands in the wide sleeves. Kemmelin let it fall again.

In her own sleeping chamber, she slipped a clean, white dress over her head and tied the belt.

Zaffrie was not in sight when Kemmelin entered the blood hall. Probably still searching the bath caves, she thought mechanically. Several people, recognizing her as the one who had taken their coins, called out to her, asking when Marja would start. Kemmelin didn't answer. She went down the steps and onto the stage, passing carefully between two of the low torches which blazed around the perimeter.

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When she seated herself at the harp, the blood hall took on an air of anticipation. None of the people there had ever seen a blood harpist wear white. All of them were expecting Marja, not this young girl. Kemmelin held her fingers above the strings, waiting until she could hear her own music past the blood pounding in her ears. She began to play.

Her performance was not long, as she had so few songs ready. Blood streamed from the myriad cuts on her fingers and stained the skirt and sleeves of the white dress. Even the bodice was flecked with red. Kemmelin took no notice. The music erupted from her fingers and the blood harp wailed and sang.

When she stopped, there was stillness. Perhaps because the people expected more music. Kemmelin stood, blood dripping from her fingers, for a long moment before she remembered to raise her arms and turn in a slow circle.

She was a quarter of the way through her turn when the drumming began, a deep, low, vibration that she felt more than heard. She finished the circle and let her arms drop. The pain intensified as more blood reached the wounds. She held herself as straight as possible and exited the stage.

In the first chamber, she stopped only long enough to grab a torch. This time — no matter how difficult it was to get there — she had to reach her special place.

If there was a forever, Kemmelin was sure she visited it on that journey. She was gasping by the time she entered the twisted tunnel. Once again, she didn't bother to disrobe before entering the water.

She was afraid to look at her hands, but after the sharp pain had subsided, she forced herself to. Only then, when she could see that the damage was only superficial, with a cut or two deeper than the rest, but all the fingers whole, did she let herself cry.

She had done it. Played a great harp in a hall full of people and made a circle with her arms covered with blood. Without thinking, she raised her hands above the water and above her head.

"It's the music in your heart," said the old woman's voice nearby. "Not the drumming of the heels."

Kemmelin turned quickly, lowering her arms. The water in the pool splashed.

Zaffrie stood just inside the door. "The warm water will set that blood," she said. "You'll never wear that dress again."

"Did you hear?" asked Kemmelin. "Did you hear?"

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The old woman nodded. "Yes," she said. She knelt down beside the edge of the pool. "It was good. Let me see your hands."

"Marja left," Kemmelin said, raising her hands for inspection. "She — " it was beyond her right now to detail the conversation. "She just left," she finished simply.

Zaffrie nodded over the girl's hands. "Some leave," she said. Her face looked troubled. "If they can." She gave Kemmelin her hands back. "These will do. Don't be in any hurry to get out though."

"How did you find me?"

Zaffrie laughed. "How do you think?"

"Oh," Kemmelin said, after an instant, "the blood."

"I didn't need the blood," the old woman said. "Do you think you are the first young harpist to bathe in this chamber?"

"I, uh — "

"Never mind. We all do. I did, when I 'discovered' it. It never occurred to me to wonder about the hole to set the torch in."

Kemmelin had to laugh too, laughter that was at least a quarter wild, unshed tears. "Me either," she admitted. "I thought it was natural."

"Convenient but natural," said the old woman.

The talk of the baths had brought back the memory of Marja's puzzling comment. "When Marja was leaving, she said she hoped she could do without the baths." Kemmelin made it into a question.

Zaffrie looked at her oddly. "Didn't they tell you about the baths in that village of yours?"

Kemmelin shook her head.

"Harp teeth," the old woman swore quietly. "And I've been letting you soak into bliss every day. Did you never wonder," she asked, "why you wanted to spend so much time in the water?"

"It's warm," said Kemmelin, "and it heals my fingers and — "

"Yes, yes," said Zaffrie. "But didn't you bathe every day before you started playing? Before the harp tasted your fingers?"

Kemmelin nodded, still puzzled. "It feels good."

"You need the water," said the woman. "I thought you knew. There is something in the water that heals the fingers as it draws in the soul. Something we covet and crave." She touched the water with the toe of her shoe. "I thought you knew."

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The water lapped at Kemmelin's shoulders as the truth about it filled her mind. Even if she ran from the pool now, denying the attraction, she would be back, submerging herself. "You should have told me," she said.

"I thought you knew," said Zaffrie again.

Kemmelin had no answer. It made no difference, she realized. Inside, where the waters could not reach, the great bloody music surged. If she never left this place, it would not be the waters that held her.

The silence stretched out. "I hope Marja is happy," whispered Kemmelin.

"I hope she isn't drowning herself in a lake because it isn't the baths."

They said nothing after these grim words. Then Zaffrie stood. "I will leave you for a while," she said. "Don't you drown."

"I won't," said Kemmelin. "I couldn't."

"No," said Zaffrie. "Nothing could hold you down right now." She started into the tunnel. "I need to find a girl," she said. "Someone who would be a harpist, to sweep and polish."

"And haul wood and water," Kemmelin finished, too quietly for Zaffrie to hear.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

STRANGE DAYS AND YOUR AVERAGE PSYCHO KILLERS

IF DIRECTOR Kathryn Bigelow ever got ahold of a decent script, she'd be one *dangerous* filmmaker. I thought that when I first saw her punk-western vampire flick, *Near Dark* (1987). And I've felt that watching every film of hers since. She brings such creative juice to the shooting of an action sequence that you are momentarily spellbound.

Trouble is, in a movie — even a Hollywood action pic — some kind of plotline has to kick in at some point. And, eventually, a character is gonna have to open his or her mouth and say something. And that's when Kathryn Bigelow's films invariably shoot themselves in the foot. The hero, whether female (in *Blue Steel*, 1990) or male (in *Point Break*, 1991) usually falls under the spell of a character (anyone from a pin-stripes psycho to a surfer-dude who robs banks) deeply in touch with their dark side, and then the hero—and the movie — start acting *really stupid*.

And that's where she loses me. Stellar filmmaking technique doesn't make a ludicrous movie plot any more believable. And it can't make an idiotic hero any less of a fool.

It isn't enough that Bigelow has the power to place her viewer inside the fear of a rookie cop during a shoot-out. And experiencing the momentary thrill of surfing or sky diving from the safety of your cineplex seat doesn't make a two hour movie worth watching, either.

Bigelow's proven talent for bringing her audience into the death-defying experiences of her film characters did, however, make her the perfect choice to helm a movie about voyeurism in a violent world. Namely, the near-future noirish thriller, *Strange Days*, set against the backdrop of New Year's Eve, 1999.

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Of course, it probably didn't hurt that during the early development stages of the film she was married to the guy behind the project, action king James Cameron. But look how adult they are about divorce in La-La-Land! Bigelow still got to direct, long after her breakup with Cameron.

I'd like to think that this is proof of the powerful Mr. Cameron's unshakable faith in his former wife's directing talents. But, who knows? Maybe there is some bizarre revenge plot at work here. You know, rather than direct the film he co-wrote (with Jay Cocks), Cameron gives it to his ex because he knows the screenplay is a turkey that will not fly. (The fact that Cameron claims to have co-written the preposterous *Point Break* — from an original screenplay by Peter Iliff — makes this scenario seem frighteningly possible.)

Yes, it pains me to say it, but Kathryn Bigelow has squandered her considerable talents one more time with *Strange Days*.

It's not the worst film I've ever seen. It's not even close to being the worst of the year. Even compared to other recent futuristic serial-killer-in-Los Angeles tales — like this summer's *Virtuosity* — *Strange Days* looks pretty good. But the question remains, why did this movie have to be about California psycho killers at all? It's been done. Too often. And that is one of the reasons the film is violently, boringly predictable.

It's a shame, really. Because the basic concept of *Strange Days*, if not completely original, is, at least, interesting. It has to do with a new, beyond-VR technology designed by the federal government for surveillance, but black-marketed on the streets as entertainment of the most addictive kind.

And the pusher of choice for your "clips" is a former vice cop named Lenny Nero, played by Ralph Fiennes.

Let me stop right here and say that, as far as I'm concerned, the casting of the lead is another key weakness of *Strange Days*. Fiennes, a British actor who burst on the film scene as an SS monster in *Schindler's List*, was trained at the Royal Academy and is a respected alum of both the National Theater and the Royal Shakespeare Company. Obviously, the man knows how to act. But he seemed all wrong for the part of Lenny Nero.

There is something uniquely American about this type of noirish hero. He's a loser, a miserable s.o.b., sure. But his male bravado hides a secret reserve of strength. He calls on it when he has to. But he'd rather rely on his talent for cracking wise whenever possible.

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Strange Days seems to have been written with just such a protagonist in mind. But Fiennes's Lenny seems overly cerebral and genuinely weak. (I never, for one second, believed that this guy was a former member of the L.A.P.D. Vice Squad.) And when Ralph tries to deliver a wisecrack, it falls flat every time.

Perhaps the rarefied Mr. Fiennes seems even more poorly cast in the role of Lenny because he has to play so many scenes against the powerhouse acting of Angela Bassett. Here is a performer who is not only well-trained (she's an alum of the Yale Drama School) but also instinctively right in every role — no matter how small or weak — I've ever seen her play.

In *Strange Days*, Bassett plays Lenny's friend, Mace, a chauffeur cum security guard who guides her corporate clients through the meaner-than-ever streets of L.A. By 1999, according to this movie, no one seems to do anything during the light of day. And after nightfall, even local cops carry metal shields when they want to stroll down the Boulevard. Police ranks have been augmented by battalions of National Guard troops. As for the general populace, anyone who gets their car across town without it being torched will probably have to clear several police roadblocks along the way.

The city is in bad, really *bad*, shape. (Although the filmmakers never explain how things disintegrated so far in a mere four years. Guess we're just supposed to take all the media hype about society going to hell in a hand basket and multiply it a hundred times in our minds.)

So, the ugly chaos is so intense that Mace is kept busy ferrying Japanese businessmen to nightclubs where party animals reenact Nazi book-burnings for innocent amusement, and take part in ritualistic mutilation torture for an evening's fun. That's not everyone's idea of a good time, of course. For those who prefer a more passive approach to sick entertainment, there's Lenny's game.

And his contraband technology, "straight from the cerebral cortex," is no archaic VR contraption with goggles and gloves. Lenny's SQUID (Superconducting Quantum Interfering Device) provides more thrills with fewer frills, for thems that can afford it. A wire skullcap allows a recorder to store their visual/mental/emotional experience of an event on a CD "clip." Then, these same experiences can be played back for anyone who puts on a similar skullcap, and replays the clip.

Never mind that a society this far in ruins probably couldn't de-

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velop this great a leap in VR in a few years. I am certainly willing to make the belief leap with the filmmakers that such a system could shortly exist. But that doesn't mean that I agree that its use would be so unvaryingly nasty.

In interviews prior to the release of *Strange Days*, Kathryn Bigelow made mention of the "potential for mind expansion" in such an "extraordinary social tool." No doubt. But there is absolutely no indication that anyone is using Lenny's little fantasy walkman for anything even vaguely enlightening or uplifting.

Yoga or transcendental meditation for the lazy, perhaps? A convenient massage for someone who's just worked out? A joyous, peaceful moment at a sylvan waterfall for a stressed executive or harried mom? Not in a Hollywood movie. Not on your life!

While Lenny likes to think of himself as a "Santa Claus of the Subconscious" providing a "humanitarian service," Mace succinctly terms his clips as "porno" for wireheads. But this porno is seldom merely sexual. Of the clips Lenny has, which we are actually invited to experience as a movie audience, only two are fairly benign.

One is Lenny's personal SQUID scrapbook of a nice day of skating and sex with his faithless lover, Faith (Juliette Lewis). The other, a few seconds in duration, shows a staged lesbian sex scene between two pathetic drug-addicts.

No, the clips Bigelow brings her movie audience into are far from mind-expanding. They include a violent robbery with a deadly end (which opens the film), and several murder scenes. In one, a messianic black rap star called Jeriko One (Glenn Plummer) is executed along with a friend and a party girl. In two others, we get to experience the thrill of a psycho killer as he appears to stalk, beat, rape, and murder young whimpering females. And, as an added treat, the blindfolded victim is "wired" in such a way that she is able to see "her own torture."

I suspect that if a man had directed this movie, critics would have slammed the director for the prurient use of violence against women and black males. But the lovely Kathryn Bigelow seems to have avoided all such criticism.

She shouldn't have. These scenes are indeed exploitive crap. If the violent clips invited us to question our voyeuristic appetites for eroticized violence, I could have accepted their use. Heck, I might have been willing to settle if they'd, at the very least, worked toward a rational suspense

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plot. But, although *Strange Days* includes two murder mysteries, neither of them, in the long run, makes a whole lot of sense. And neither of them is very interesting.

It's always a very bad sign when an overly talkative murderer explains his actions, at length, at a movie's climax, and you feel even more confused after his explanations than before he started them. (Sure, Buddy. You want to frame this guy for several murders, yet you leave him a clip that shows he's being stalked by the real murderer. Very smart!) But maybe that's why filmmakers rely so heavily on psycho killers in thriller plots where they don't really belong: when the story gets irrational, you can blame it all on the insanity of your villain!

More troubling was the way Cameron, Cocks, and Bigelow copped out on their killer-cop subplot. For those who wish to waste their time on this movie, I won't reveal too much of this particular storyline. But suffice it to say, the movie turns out to be a lot less gutsy that I hoped it would be.

It *looks*, at one point, like *Strange Days* is going to say something disturbing (and worthwhile) about police attitudes toward racial minorities. After all, how controversial could this be, in a movie about L.A.'s continued slide into social hell? We already have present-day "clips" that have provided us with haunting evidence of where the L.A.P.D. is headed.

Yes, the Rodney King videotape and the audio tape interviews between a failed screenwriter and a rabid Mark Fuhrman aren't as newfangled as Lenny's SQUID, but, for many of us, they had a powerful impact — not unlike a jack-boot in the guts. Bigelow and friends could only hope for sounds and images with half the emotional punch.

Unfortunately, the filmmakers turn out to be real scaredy-cats when it comes to putting genuine social content in their film. They back away from exploring a dismal (but all too possible) future in which the institutional racism of the L.A.P.D. could reach the point of death squads and political assassinations. (No, the rape and murder of a woman is a much safer form of entertainment. No political backlash, to speak of, for depicting *that*.)

By the end of *Strange Days*, our assassination turns out to be a couple of rogue cops who panicked. (Query: How many rogues does it take for a public safety agency to admit that it is in critical condition?) And there is even a Great White Father of a straight-arrow Commissioner (who resembles Daryl Gates not in the least) who takes a noble stand for

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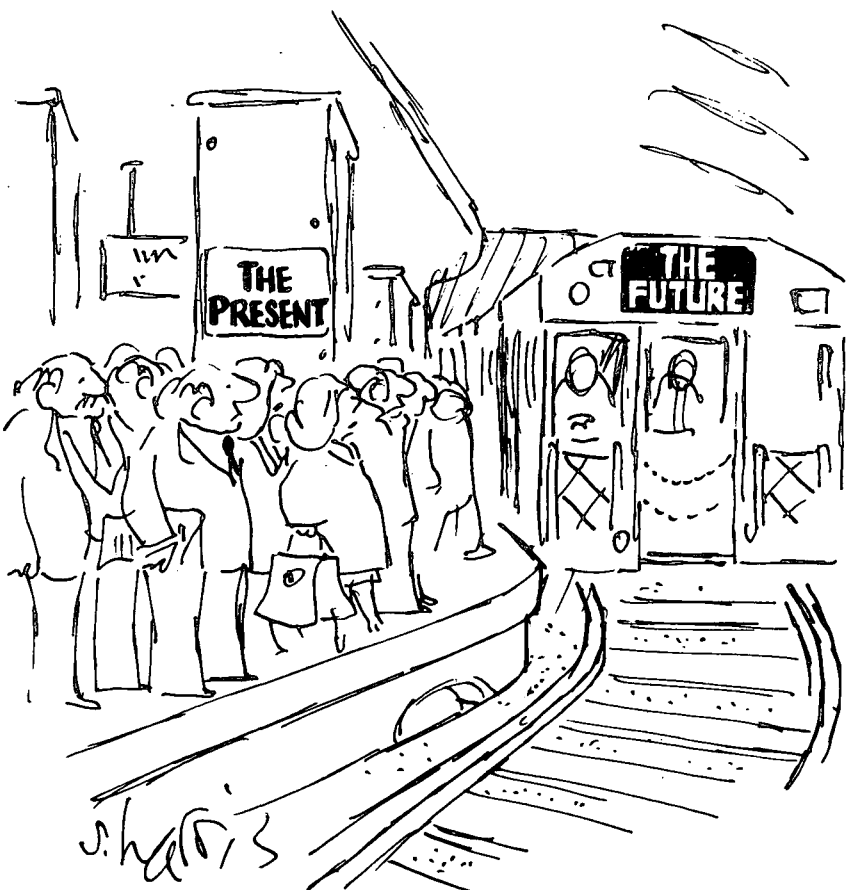
social justice amid the New Year's hoopla and general carnage that mark the end of the film.

Cowardly, numbingly violent, flashy but meaningless — that is *Strange Days*. As always with a Kathryn Bigelow film, I was, at times, wowed by her cinematic skill. The seamless POV (point-of-view) "clip" scenes, for example, were shot through newly developed helmetcam techniques. And they were mighty spiffy. But directorial hotdogging doesn't make a movie worth watching. A movie, even a futuristic noirish thriller, has to make sense, and it has to have something to say. *Strange Days* has nothing to say to anyone.



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Robert Onopa's most recent story for F&SF *("Traffic," March 1995) was the first in a small flurry of stories that appeared last spring. (The other in the sf field appeared in* Tomorrow Magazine.*)*

Bob gets much of his inspiration from his Hawaiian home. He says that the idea for "Camping in the Biosphere" came from "the swarm-like rise in rescue helicopter traffic which followed the opening of a new trail through Maunawili Valley, where I live here on Windward Oahu."

Camping in the Biosphere Reserve

By Robert Onopa

THE TRAILHEAD WAS SITUated at the end of the parking lot of the National EcoParks Lodge on Kauai, at the summit of Kokee. Beyond its green steel gate lay a switchback descent into the last undeveloped Hawaiian wilderness. The valley at its heart, Kalalau, spread northeast between two ridges which splayed wide and peaked like bent knees before the ridgelines descended steeply to the Pacific. Within the valley's curtain walls the landscape undulated broad and green with tropical softwoods and hardwoods and palms; the air was rich with the odor of white ginger.

Among the dozens of other hikers bright with outdoor gear, Max Dugan, Ph.D., stood with Ghia Candiotti, B.A., pending, in the staging area, awaiting their assigned starting time. His feet were squirming in new hiking boots, the way he remembered they'd squirmed in new Nike pumps the night he'd lost his virginity with Sharon Stussy thirty years before, a week after O.J.'s low speed chase.

His heart was full. Sometimes, he told himself, life gives you these moments: you win a prize unexpectedly, a painful struggle transforms itself unaccountably into a triumph, a fantasy comes true.

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Just months ago, Ghia had been an attractive but decidedly off-limits student in his course English 461: Wordsworth Hypertext and Nature. Today he stood with her looking out over Kalalau, marveling at shades of green more vivid than the holos in the EcoPark brochures, watching her tongue and lips struggle — with an erotic poignancy, he thought — around the Hawaiian plant names shimmering at the border of the holding area on tiny holoplaques.

Ghia's number had come up in the Interior Department's lottery, giving her the right to camp for a week in one of the last wilderness areas on the planet. She'd picked him to join her on the trip, to sleep with her in her tent.

When she'd first extended her invitation, Max had misheard: "Who's bent?" he'd asked, lost in M.A. exams he was grading.

"Tent," she'd replied. "I'm inviting you to sleep in my tent."

He'd taken a deep breath. Ghia was very smart, just a bit plump, sweet as a ripe peach — he'd sleep with her in an overloaded laundry basket if she asked. But for starters there was Acura, his fiancee, as aware as he was of the faculty/student code engraved over the gates since the turn of the Twenty-first Century: *Amas cognis non corpus* (emphasis on *non*). He wasn't sure, but he guessed that if the university got wind of the trip, he could be fired before the sun went down on Bloomington, maybe even jailed — then conceivably visited in his cell by Acura with a DNA-altering cake. He'd settled in his office chair and heard Ghia out with a dreamy resigned smile, thinking of Coleridge and Sara Hutchinson, of Shelley running off with fourteen-year-old girls, of Dylan Thomas and Vassar coeds, the diseased pleasures of earlier centuries.

"See, when I won the permit, I realized that all the ideas I have about Nature came from your class," Ghia'd told him. "Oh, I've done all the virtual games, even camped with Girl Scouts over in the HoosierDome. But I've never even been to Six Flags Over Yellowstone, much less on an ecotour. All those ideas from your class I can't really understand just by myself. You know, like Nature as 'the guide, the guardian of your heart?' 'Tintern Abbey,' right? Professor Dugan...?" The Midwestern afternoon light, yellowish-gray this high in the Humanities Highrise, gave a weird cast to the holopix of Kalalau she'd brought along ('no greater destination in all of ecotourism'). Still, Hawaii looked nice.

"Call me Max. The semester's over now. It'll make it easier for me to fantasize."

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"Max. So now I have a chance to get the experience behind the ideas, to understand them really. I need you there to help."

"You're aware I have a fiancée who teaches in the Law School?"

"Perfect. She'll understand absolutely," Ghia'd said. "I mean your being with me is actually a requirement now. See, if I can't make a practical connection between the ideas from your class and my real experience, there's no authenticity, no fulfillment. I don't wind up with a legitimate education." Her innocent face was crossed by a dark look. "Your fiancée'll be aware that it's my legal right to require interpretive completion of my coursework. From you. If you look in the student/faculty conduct code? Section four, paragraph six? The one they added last year?"

"Gimme a minute?" he'd asked. As Ghia wandered along his collection of antique Twentieth Century books shoved among the storage cubes in the adjoining media room, Max punched up Acura's home number on the keyboard of his desk terminal — she'd be starting dinner — toggled video on.

"Well," Acura conceded from her kitchen, whacking a turkey sausage on the cutting board with unusual vigor, "your ex-student happens to be right. You have a pedagogical responsibility; the Dean can fire you if you don't go with her. That's now the law."

Max tried to look piously dismayed. Acura waved the knife around, splatting turkey product on the kitchen wall, on her suit, on the blue tie he'd bought her for Law Day. When the screen went blank he remembered the times he'd smiled at Ghia in class, a distant longing in his heart — well, maybe not his heart. Had he brought this on himself? Was life wonderful or what?

"'Nature never did betray the heart that loved her.'" He smiled when she returned.

"'Tintern Abbey' again." She grinned. "William to Dorothy. This is going to be fun."

So precisely at ten that late summer morning the Interactive Ranger Terminal inspected Ghia's permit, certified their Emergency Position Locating Devices, scanned and approved their shoes, then propelled them through the gate. Max stepped behind her down the trail — the IR Terminal's last audio was a warning that it was paved only for the first kilometer. On the upslope a wall of pink heliconia defined the route in a disciplined rank of plants so healthy they looked artificial. Downslope beyond a rock wall the

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pali fell away dramatically over a paradise of flowering trees and vines and half-hidden waterfalls. They seemed to be floating in mid-air in a dream of Eden.

Though Max was having second thoughts. He hadn't actually seen Ghia again until they'd met at the big Lihue jetport after separate flights from the mainland. It had been one thing to bathe in the envy of other middle-aged men (hair thinning just like his) as they'd watched him pair up with an attractive young woman, quite another to assume she'd really brought him here to snuggle in her tent and do the nasty.

Yet hadn't she called two weeks before to remind him about his flight time wearing only a fetching mini-jumpsuit? Hadn't she spent longer than necessary brushing his clothes for possible alien seeds as they'd waited at the trailhead? Hadn't she even seed-combed his hair, stroking slowly, twirling strands around her fingers? They'd groomed each other, now that he thought about it, like animals about to mate. Hadn't they? "Ghia," Max began, shifting the sixty pound pack on his back, "I think we need to get something straight."

She turned to him clear-eyed and smiling uncertainly at the hitch in his voice.

He lost it again, and blushed, unable to be direct; he'd been born in the wrong century, he supposed. "You, uh, could have hiked with a younger friend," he found himself saying.

"It's you I want to be with." She shrugged shyly, running her hand along a tall row of erect leaves.

Among them were flowers, orange and red, parrot-colored, shaped like beaks under feathery hats: Birds of Paradise, the first he'd ever seen. Yet something in the rank of foliage bothered him. "Say, if we're in the wilderness, why are these flowers in such a straight line?"

"We were talking about us?"

"Sorry. I guess we have to get beyond the paved part of the trail to see, uh, raw nature." He sucked in a breath and tried again. "And speaking of raw nature, what I was trying to say was, I mean, there we'll be, me wanting to be with you too, in the same small tent. That's kind of intimate for, uh...."

"It should be," she admitted. "I want to get to know you really well. The Wordsworth stuff was a bit of an excuse."

"Ah. Because...?"

She stopped now and he could see in her eyes that she was calculating an admission, see it coming in the way she stiffened her back. "If it's all right with you, I want to have your baby."

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"Ah. Okay," Max said, his voice rising on the second syllable, taking another deep breath, returning the hug that she'd stopped to offer, pressing her soft breasts against him. See? he told himself. He'd been reading her right all along.

Still, it was a bit strange how she slipped away from turning the hug into an embrace, laughed and skipped down the trail. He tried to keep up but the weight of his pack made him stagger.

Then the switchback doubled a ridge and became a dirt path. Ghia stopped and took it in. "Uh, 'My heart jumps...up?'" she recited speculatively. Before them lay a particularly lush pocket of the valley that had been obscured from the parking lot. A trade wind shower drifted by in the distance and set a rainbow over an enormous stand of red-blooming African tulip trees. She kicked some trail dust. "We're in the wilderness now."

"'My heart leaps up/When I behold a rainbow in the sky,'" Max recited properly. "Wordsworth had that right."

Ten minutes later, rainbow still in sight, he heard her say, "How would he describe...?"

"'These beauteous forms...'" Max offered with a confused mumble, waving his hand at the trees, having caught himself focusing on the curves of Ghia's tight hiking shorts.

"Not the trees, silly. These gardenias. I don't see any straight rows. Virgin landscape for sure."

There were indeed gardenia bushes clumped randomly alongside the trail, their leaves deep lustrous green, their flowers paper white.

"Mmmm," he said. "Except these gardenias aren't originally native to Hawaii. I downloaded a native plant database while I was waiting for you in Lihue. Like those trees you pointed at. African tulips. Introduced species."

"You're being too technical. That doesn't mean they're not wild."

"Right, though, um, technically, this bush has been, uh...trimmed," Max said. He pointed to stem cuts below the first layer of leaves.

She looked at him peevishly. "You're really a perfectionist."

"I'm sure if we keep hiking..." he said to cheer himself up.

Which turned out to be hot work, the hiking. After the coolness of elevation and the appealing descent, the trail crossed a dry section and climbed a side ridge, all crumbly rock and hard on the hands. They found themselves in a long hollow blocked from the breeze, traversing a dusty

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xeriscape of stunted vegetation. Under an increasingly intense sun they scrambled over car-sized boulders for an hour, finally crossed a parched stream bed, pulled themselves up a second ridge, and then dropped into tropical forest again. But now the coolness of the higher section was only a memory. This forest was humid, and huge mosquitoes buzzed in the air.

They stopped for lunch. When he raised his Vegamite sandwich to his mouth, Max realized he was starting to smell.

"I don't know," Ghia said, her face glistening with perspiration. "Am I supposed to be feeling a kind of oneness?"

He could see the couple who'd started ten minutes before them sitting with their lunch two hundred meters ahead, and there was of course the couple behind, who'd caught up twice and had fallen back, muttering — they were glowering behind a cluster of mossy boulders three hundred meters back. "At this point, no, not a oneness," he lectured amiably. "Though of course, as Wordsworth tells us, Nature connects. You want to first concentrate on a kind of twoness, say." He realized to his shame he was at it again, visualizing his metaphors as her sexual parts, this time staring at her breasts.

"The oneness comes later?" she asked.

He thought of the two of them in the small tent. "You're reading my mind."

So he'd have to bathe in the mountain-fed stream he'd read ran beside their assigned campsite — icy water would get him close enough to raw nature, he supposed. For the moment he reached out for her and they hugged again. Whether she was actually responding, making a genuine move of her own or not, or whether her gesture was just the signature of growing physical exhaustion he couldn't quite tell, but she put her head on his shoulder and started running her fingers through his hair.

So he buried his face in her hair too, her lovely auburn hair, and nuzzled.

"Gee, you're sticking your whole face in it."

She was such a Twenty-first Century woman; she made romance seem as attractive as exchanging bodily fluids with a dog. "Well, what are you doing yourself?" She still had a grip on a strand of his hair.

"Do you remember," she asked, "telling the class that back in Wordsworth's time couples exchanged locks of hair?"

"Sure."

She let go and looked him in the eyes. "It's such a wonderful idea. I've been thinking about it for a month. And I realized that sure enough I got it

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from your class too." Ghia smiled. "I love the way you inspire me." Now she blushed. "That's why I want to have your baby — there's something in your genes that anticipates me, takes whatever's in me one step further."

He was thrilled to hear her say it again, knew he was beaming and looking silly. He felt one with Shelley now, with Keats and Fanny Brawne, with Wordsworth and Annette Vallon.

"Professor...I mean, Max. Let's do it now."

Max looked with skepticism back down the trail where the couple who had started behind them was waiting again. "I, uh, thought maybe we'd set up camp, have a nice dinner, have a bath...."

"To exchange locks of hair?"

"Right. No. I mean yes." Max dropped his pack and fumbled for his EC Army knife, the one with the little scissors.

"What kind of deal is this?" he asked when they reached the campsite. For all the mosquitoes and centipedes hovering around the perimeter, the tent site turned out to be a TerraTurf "mudless" pad abutted by a numbered pipe-sized post. The cold stream ran nearby all right, but it had been set off by rocks to run behind the site like a fence — at least it cut off the ants, whose mounds were a meter high. The ocean was still so far away they could barely hear the surf.

"Thank god," Ghia said, "I'm ready to stop."

Max heaved off his pack and detached the self-assembling tent. Ghia disappeared into the bush to collect bugs — he'd learned to his dismay that she was an insecto-vegetarian, and that for dinner he'd have to endure grubs. He'd been forewarned by the EcoPark brochure ("featuring the incredible variety of the last largely unexploited food source on earth"), even preconditioned at the IU faculty club ("where meal worms make a meal"), but he'd hoped she'd go for the sirloin he'd brought along. The self-assembling tent popped right up, though staking it down reminded him of Odysseus' struggle to subdue the shape-changer Proteus. As he sorted out the prepacked gear they'd received with her permit, he marveled at the new Emergency Position Locating Devices, little disks the size of headphone earpieces. They were topped by red pull-tabs you wanted to be very careful handling: once you pulled out the tab the Rangers up at the summit mobilized for an extraction. The rest of his chores were grunt work: setting up a rain fly and dining canopy,

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cleaning the fire pad, gathering some deadwood, digging a latrine. He wound up slimy with sweat and streaked with mud — "mudless mud," he supposed. He grabbed the folding bucket and picked his way over sharp rocks to the clear water of the stream. The steamy air had made him think it wouldn't be cold after all. He'd thought wrong.

"I heard you yelling," Ghia said when she returned. "Are you okay?"

Max told her about his icy shower.

"Why didn't you use the hot water?" she asked, moving what turned out to be a valve on the numbered pipe he'd taken to be a marker for the campsite — now he could trace it across the path and straight up to a solar array half-hidden in the treetops.

"Christ," he said, "isn't there anything remotely natural here?"

"Please don't be so annoyed. You remind me of my father."

"Look," he said, " I think we have a right to expect an EcoPark to maintain...."

"Of course it isn't all natural here. There hasn't been anything 'all natural' on the planet for a hundred years. You taught the class that: there's plastic in the deepest ocean, man-made chemicals in every cloud, civilization's debris in every landscape."

"I guess I should have known better." Max sighed. "At least there's Wordsworth."

"Who didn't spend any of his time in any wilderness either, if I remember you pointing out. Did we read about mud in his poetry? Snakes? Vicious mosquitoes? You said he wrote like he was out for a picnic in a park."

"Oh, all right," he said, tired and horny and irritated at hearing his own lecture spit back at him. "Let's just set up the damned sleeping bags."

"You're ruining it for me too." Ghia had her hands on her hips in the same posture Acura used when she was pissed and going to cut him off. It was alarming.

"I've got an idea," Max said. "What if we just camp somewhere else? Who's to know? Let's go up on that little hill, say." Max pointed to a lush knoll back toward the ridge. Through the trees he could see it was topped with a grove of palms and a grassy clearing. "We'll have a great view. We'll both be happy."

It took more than an hour to get the tent back into its stuff sack and to repack the gear. Then a short hike, then they had to set up again on the lumpy site — but the view, all the way south to the dramatically steep mountains, all the way north to the wide blue ocean, was breathtaking.

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By sunset the new campsite was squared away. Max thought it might be time for him to make his move. He was scraping the last bit of grub stew off his plate as Ghia told him now how spiritual his rejection of the authorized pad had been, how the fading light stimulated her in a way she'd never experienced.

Max felt her leaning against him, warm and sweet smelling — she'd tucked plumeria blossoms behind her ears.

"What a beautiful colors," she hummed.

He dredged his mind for some lines to rehabilitate Wordsworth, found them: "'Live in the yellow light,'" he recited, "'ye distant groves!/ And kindle, thou blue Ocean! such hues/As veil the Almighty Spirit....'"

A crash sounded in the thicket behind them, then another. Then the bush itself began to move: a troop of Boy Scouts in tropical camo marched up the hill taking bearings with their sat nav wristwatches. They marched directly into their campsite and spread out. One of the kids asked if they were part of the night mapping exercises on the hill.

Max wrestled with the tent; it was nearly dark as he and Ghia hiked back to their authorized camping pad.

BY THE TIME he set the tent up for the third time it was eleven P.M. This time he took a hot shower. As midnight approached he had the satisfaction of velcroing the two sleeping bags together into a double bag with just enough room for them to seriously cuddle.

"I suppose that's the way," Ghia muttered over his shoulder. At her insistence he'd set one Emergency Position Locating Device and a flashlight at each side of the bag. "You don't know what can happen out in the wild like this," she'd said.

He discreetly left the tent as she changed into her sleeping clothes. He set the PowerCoals on the campfire pad to glow romantically, doused the iridium lantern, and took off his own clothes and folded them over a low branch. When he crawled into the dim tent and slid his leg into the bag, he was naked.

"Now," Max said, "I'd like to show you something actually natural for a change."

The precise moment his bare thigh brushed her skin she screamed, a huge deep-lunged scream, her mouth near enough to his ear to set his head ringing.

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Max lurched to his knees and grabbed his flashlight — but when he switched it on he was holding it backwards. The bright beam unfortunately spotlit his privates, then partially blinded him. She continued to scream. Finally he aimed the light out the tent door, stumbled out through the flap, saw nothing, tripped back in, slapping at the bite of a particularly aggressive mosquito. The first thing he noticed was how fetchingly tight her synsilk nightshirt was, how her nipples had come erect synergistically with his own anatomy. Then he noticed the red cycle light blinking on an Emergency Position Locating Device upended at the head of the sleeping bag.

"What did you do? There wasn't anything out there. What...what.... Oh my god. Now they're going to extract us."

"I'm sorry," she said.

Max dragged the disordered bag around his waist, appalled at the cycle light, trying to take in their new situation. "Sorry? Christ, Ghia! Rangers'll be here in twenty minutes."

"I said I'm sorry. The way you went outside to check for like a wild animal? I guess you really do only mean well."

"Look," he said, "we have a little under twenty minutes. There's just time.... We can still get it on."

"Don't be gross," she told him.

"*You're* the one who said you wanted to have my baby."

"Sex is for my boyfriend," she told him.

"Listen to me Ghia: you're the one who said you wanted my baby." The tent seemed to be spinning around him.

"Right," Ghia said. "And now that I have a lock of your hair, I have a sample of your DNA. I can have your baby when I want to have a baby. What did you think...? Gee, you know, you're the one who gave me the idea about the hair. But to have sex with a man as old as my father? God, what a gross idea."

"Thanks a lot."

"Don't be so mad. To tell the truth, I'm almost tempted. It's going to be a whole week before I hike out of here and see Bruno."

"What do you mean, a whole week? You don't understand. You pop the alarm, the law says you go out with the Rangers. There's a forty thousand dollar fine for false...."

"Well, actually, I don't have to go out. I only tripped your locator. See? You're the only one who has to go." Sure enough, the EPLD at her pillow lay

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inert. "Honestly, I'm disappointed too," she went on. "I really learned a lot about Wordsworth today. Now there won't be any more lessons for me."

"Yes, there will," Max said, reaching over and lifting the headphone shaped device from beside her pillow. "Here's a lesson about raw human nature."

"Oh, my god, don't...."

Her emergency locator made a barely audible whirring sound when he ripped out its red tab. He wondered if the muffled sound of a helicopter he could already hear in the distance was for them.

"And give me my hair back," he said in the blinking light.

Back in Bloomington the streets were empty, a contrast to the crowded lodge at Kokee, the swarming trails around the volcano on the Big Island, the gaudy casinos at Waikiki.

Acura picked him up at the airport wearing a trenchcoat, which he thought was very odd for a sunny day, but when they got to the parking lot, she flashed it wide open. His surprise made him drop his backpack. Beneath the coat she was wearing only scanty lingerie — a kind of tiger outfit with a push up bra and high cut on the hips.

"Wha...?"

"Call me Wild Thang," she said. "I did some soul-searching while you were gone. This is the real me."

He was discreet enough not to mention the possible role jealousy might have played in her deliberations, not that afternoon, or that evening, or that night, or the next morning, when she'd finally drunk all the champagne, exhausted them both, and nearly physically handicapped herself for life.

"Lord," he said, "that was wonderful."

"Mmmm. What are you thinking?" she asked. "Really."

"Really? I'm remembering some Wordsworth."

"Recite it for me."

"The lines are from 'The Prelude': 'Not in Utopia,' Wordsworth wrote, 'Or some secreted Island, Heaven knows where!/But in the very world, which is the world/Of all of us, — is the place where in the end/We find our happiness, or not at all!' What it means, counselor, is that I'm happy to be home."

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SCIENCE

JANET ASIMOV

SOUNDING OFF

I AM GRATEful that my ears function. I'm also grateful for my supply of ear plugs. You see, there are sounds — and other sounds — but bear with me.

Human beings are born noisy. In my medical younger days I delivered fifty of them, and I remember how everyone smiles with relief when the baby gives that first yell, the first of a great many as any parent will affirm.

Most other animals make noises that can seem melodious to us and may give pleasure to the sound-maker, although I suspect that the male bird's pleasure is far outweighed by his need to demonstrate his possession of a territory. And do whales sing for individual delight, to communicate, or to bond emotionally?

It's humanity that seems to have an extrordinary built-in need to listen to many kinds of sounds purely for pleasure, whether or not the sounds convey meaning of any kind to others or to ourselves.

Most of us enjoy human voices and like to engage in conversation — or listen to talk shows — whether or not there's any need to communicate something meaningful. There are plenty of well-known human voices that give such pleasure when heard that it's said their owners could charm when reading aloud the telephone book.

We are also, above all, a music-making and music-loving species, using both voices and a staggering variety of instruments.

So far, there's no way to tell if early, middle, and late hominids made sounds for pleasure. They left no musical instruments behind, although they might have blown through hollow reeds, banged on hollow bones, and exercised their evolving vocal apparatus with a lot of sing-

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ing. All this musical noise-making would help scare off predators, but I'd guess that our earliest ancestors did it purely for pleasure, too.

As far as I know, *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis* also left no remains of musical instruments but again this could mean that those used were not sturdy enough to last. The famous bone flute at New York's American Museum of Natural History (you can not only see it but also hear music made with it) was the product of our direct ancestors, paleolithic *Homo sapiens sapiens*.

Sounds — or at least vibrations — seem to be an irrevocable part of life, at all stages. Life began in the ocean, where the pressure waves of sound are more efficiently transmitted than they are in air. Our landlubber ears don't hear much in water, but the seas are nevertheless full of sounds made by animals.

According to Lorus and Margery Milne, a hydrophone warning system operating in the wartime spring of 1942 could not operate because sounds "resembling pneumatic drills breaking through concrete" were drowning out the noise of submarines. After fears that these sounds were caused by a new enemy jamming technique, it was discovered that the noise was produced by croaking fish getting ready to spawn. Croaker-proof filters for the hydrophones had to be invented.

Fish make good use of water vibrations by receiving them through small inner ears and through lateral line receptors, shallow canals that contain hair cells able to signal both strength and direction of the stimulus.

Over 350 million years ago, land-dwelling vertebrates evolved improved ears to detect the weaker vibrations of sound in air. It's easy to see the large tympanic membranes behind the eyes of amphibians like modern frogs and toads. These eardrums vibrate to sound waves and are neurologically joined so that sound hitting one side will affect both. Middle ear bones transmit the drum vibrations to the papillae in the fluid of the otic capsule. When hair cell cilia are bent by vibrations, they send impulses along the auditory nerve to the brain.

Mammals also manage to hear in air by converting air vibrations into fluid vibrations. We have three little ear bones — aptly named the hammer, anvil and stirrup — which pass along and increase the vibrations transmitted by the eardrum. The stirrup vibrates the membrane of the small oval window that covers a fluid-filled vestibule containing a triple coiled tube called the cochlea (for snail-shell), from which the auditory nerve emerges.

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The sound receptors in the cochlea are, again, hair cells — those at one end activated by high frequency sound waves; those at the other by low frequency.

Vibrations from both ears are turned into stereophonic sound by being integrated in the brain stem. There are also connections to the limbic system that controls emotional arousal.

Recently it's been discovered that when the cerebral cortex processes input from the various sense organs it does not handle all of them the same way.

Generally, neurons tend to be arranged in patterns that map out function. For instance, touch receptors in the hands and feet send signals to a carefully mapped out portion of the cortex. Vision is also mapped out in a similar fashion. Hearing is different.

Signals from the auditory receptors do not seem to have a specific cortical "map" the way vision does. How does the cortex handle sound vibrations so that an animal can tell which of those two hidden lions is moving, or which of our babies is crying in the dark?

Using anesthetized cats, neuroscientists at the University of Florida, Gainesville, analyzed the patterns and electronic strength of nerve signals from the auditory cortex. Although each cat was asleep, its ears picked up sounds from eighteen loudspeakers placed around it. The sound signals went from the ears to the brain cells being monitored by the researchers.

When scientists monitor the visual cortex of the brain in this way, they can tell where the eyes are looking because signals that result from images in a particular location cause particular brain cells to fire off with "signal spikes."

In monitoring the *auditory* cortex, finding which auditory brain cells are producing spikes does not reveal the localization of the sound. The researchers worked out a computer program that could classify the electrical activity of each brain cell. This activity was measured for its strength and, more important, for its patterns of timing.

It turned out that a sound from any location would stimulate large numbers of auditory cells. The brain did not localize the sound according to the numbers and anatomical locations of the stimulated cells, but according to the *timing* of the activity each cell then showed.

While it takes the patterns from a large population of auditory cells to localize sound accurately (enabling a cat to pounce on a rustling mouse in the dark), each single neuron also localizes sound by the pattern of its

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activity. It's as if the auditory cells in the brain's cortex are tapping out special codes that show where a particular sound originates.

This coding is the way the brain responds to phenomena that exist only in time.

Sound is above all a phenomenon linked to time. What we've heard is gone once the singer stops singing or the musicians stop playing or the CD ends. This is completely unlike looking at a painting that vanishes when we close our eyes but is *still there* in the same form as when our eyes were open. The song or the symphony may be coded on the CD, or on sheet music, but this is not the same as what we've heard.

Nevertheless, we could not enjoy any piece of music if we could not remember from one phrase to the next, relating them to each other and appreciating all of them in the context of the whole. And, of course, remembering whole songs — forever. The other day all five verses of a hymn I once had to memorize as a child came flooding out while I showered. When I think of the brain space thus occupied...

According to Robert Zatorre, at the Montreal Neurological Institute, music can be held in imagination. When this is done, the visual cortex is also activated, as if "visual imagery patterns" occur along with imagined sounds. Visual patterns correlated with music reminds me of the wonder of *Fantasia* when it was first shown during the grim year of 1940.

Zatorre also says that as we listen to the notes going by they are not completely lost when the music has gone on to other notes. The previous notes and phrases are retained in memory as a "frontal and temporal lobe interaction."

People with remarkable musical talent certainly seem able to retain, replay, and create in their heads huge amounts of sound. It's said that even when deaf, Beethoven could compose by "hearing" music in his head, accurately writing down what was going on in his brain.

Presumably these musically talented people can both imagine the notes of the music they're composing in their heads and also localize the various instruments — the right instruments coming in at the right time from the right locations. How the brain does this is not well understood.

Other aspects of musical talent are being uncovered. Recently neurologists at Germany's Heinrich Heine University used magnetic resonance imaging to discover that musicians with perfect pitch apparently process sounds in the planum temporale of the left cortex. Since it's been shown that music is ordinarily

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processed in the right cortex, perfect pitch may be closely related to the language ability that occurs more in the left cortex.

Whatever happens in the brains of musical geniuses, it's clear that they are special people, using their brains in special ways. Peter Ostwald, at the University of California School of Medicine, thinks that there are many kinds of musical talent such as dexterity at instrument playing plus the abilities of recognizing tones and creating melodic structures.

Perhaps some ability to distinguish musical phrase structure is built in to all humans, according to research done at Stanford University's Department of Psychology. Five month old babies listened to different musical phrases which they could shut off by looking away from an object (a light or a checkerboard) in the test booth.

If the babies were first allowed to listen to an appropriately structured musical phrase, they then listened longer to other "naturally structured" musical phrases (from known classical works) than to the same phrases artificially mangled by putting pauses in the wrong places.

Since music appreciation seems built-in, perhaps human beings actually need it, beginning with the musical sounds of a mother's crooning speech that tunes the infant to an external interpersonal relationship. The actual beginning may well be earlier. Some psychoanalysts used to mutter about the quiet peace of the womb, but that was nonsense, for babies hear at least the mother's heart beat, if not the sound of her voice. Lonely puppies will stop whining when a loud ticking clock is put in their bed.

At the University of California at Irvine, Frances Rauscher has found that in comparison with non-musically trained three-year-olds, those who got musical training ended the year scoring 80 percent higher when tested for spatial and temporal reasoning. This isn't to say that any musically trained three-year-old will become a musician, mathematician, or engineer, but it could help.

Humanity's need for pleasurable sounds, especially music, may very well be built in. Many people prefer to exercise this need by listening to live, unamplified music. In addition to the pleasure from watching the performance, your ears seem better able to separate sounds, and to localize who's playing what.

One of my major complaints is the fad for "surround sound", in which room-encircling loudspeakers hit you on all sides with noise, making localization impossible. I prefer to face the musicians, getting the sound mainly from that direction.

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I defend my opinion by pointing out that we and most other animals did not evolve our good sound-localizing ability for nothing. When hunting animals approach downwind so the prey will not smell them, they also approach quietly. Owl feathers are superb at damping the sound of flight — because small nightactive prey have very good ears.

Some years ago Northwestern University researchers headed by Lynn Halpern studied the screeching sound produced when you scrape something hard across a blackboard. A piece of chalk will do it at times, and a fingernail almost always will. Most people shudder and stick their fingers in their ears at the noise. Halpern suspected that the sound "may mimic some naturally occurring, innately aversive event." As it happened, the sound pattern strongly resembled the warning cries of monkeys.

Our ancestors had to scavenge or hunt while keeping an ear open for the sound of a predator slithering through the underbrush in search of a quick meal of them. Localizing that sound was important. It was even more important not to be distracted by unimportant sounds.

Which brings me to work done by psychologists Alan Baddeley of England's Cambridge University and Pierre Salame of Strasbourg's Center for Bioclimatic Research. They gave tests to find out how well French college students could recall nine-digit numbers when subjected to different kinds of environmental noise.

Ninety-five decibel inanimate noise (like a subway train) did not lower ability to store numbers in short-term memory, but human voices did, even when speaking — or singing — in a language the students did not understand. No wonder students remember less when they do homework while listening to popular songs.

Having established solid scientific grounds for my gripes, I hereby complain that restaurants and stores now tend to blast music at you from every electronic pore — unlocalizable and impossible to ignore. This gives the impression that the place is busy, and it also prevents accurate thinking and critical thought, which of course may be the idea. I usually retreat to the quiet of take-out and the mail-order catalogue.

I remember a horrible occasion when Isaac and I had to go to a function which for some unfathomably sinister reason was being held at a then-famous Manhattan establishment known for loud music and revolving strobe lights. I couldn't go inside for fear that the gyrating bright lights would trigger a headache. Isaac felt obliged to make a brief appear-

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ance, but once inside he tried to talk to a friend standing close to him. Although they shouted at each other, not a word got through.

As long as I'm complaining, I'll mention that nowadays the waiting rooms of doctors and dentists are not places that make at least a feeble attempt to be soothing. Most of them are drowned in music. There is frequently a booming bass beat, just enough faster than that of the average human heart to make the heart rate increase. And most of this piped in music is not pure instrumental, but with voices that to my old-fashioned ears sound angry or in pain.

I did a little research on this and was told that many patients start swaying happily to the music and don't notice how long they have to wait. Somehow I find this difficult to believe, but then I sit in waiting rooms wearing ear plugs and thinking fondly of composer John Cage's famous "4'33"—a piece consisting of 4 minutes and 33 seconds of glorious silence, divided in three movements.

Then there's the movie theatre, with soundtrack amplified fit to kill. Movies started as silent films, so to convey emotions the actors overacted, and someone played a piano along with each reel. According to conductor John Mauceri, this movie music also helped "cover the sound of the projector, glue the scenes together, and expand the visual imagery with sonic ambiguity and magic."

When movies became talkies, music did not at first pervade the film except in musicals, but that changed until now, as Mauceri put it, "movie music assigns thematic material to dramatic or visual events, and develops and recapitulates them." Operas were already doing this somewhat, culminating in Wagner's *Ring Cycle* — a story you can grasp by listening to its musical themes — but for a long time the legitimate theater, again except for musicals, remained unmusicized. And unamplified. All too often now, however, actors wear body mikes and music is played much of the time even when nobody's singing.

I resent the music background for theatre, movies, and especially television when it is so loud that it interferes with hearing speech. Ever watch a nature show when you could hardly hear the narration for the music? It's a crime not to be able to take in every gorgeous syllable spoken by George Page.

Some movie music is legitimately great, and is now being played in concert halls, sometimes accompanied by excerpts from the relevant movies. After all, we live in what Mauceri calls a "great century of romantic excess." Fine. May I hear the dialogue, too?

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The other day when I saw a suspense movie much more suspenseful than average I suddenly realized that the hero was walking — unaccompanied by a musical sound track — in a quiet dark place where every tiny sound could mean something ominous. It was scary because you had no idea what to expect, much scarier than if music had been expressing the idea that something wicked this way comes.

Loud music can be wicked enough. For over a decade there have been ominous reports of increased numbers of patients with diminished hearing. Prolonged and repeated exposure to sounds of 80 to 85 decibels stiffens and kills hair cells in the inner ear. Ordinary conversation registers at 60 decibels and some factory and rush hour noise at 90, but a disco or rock concert is usually at 97 and can go as high as 120, almost as loud as a jet airplane taking off. Hearing noise of 100 decibels for as little as 2 hours a day will result in permanent severe hearing loss.

Fifteen years ago the noise laboratory at the University of Tennessee found that more than 60 percent of 410 college freshmen had the kind of high frequency hearing loss commonly found only in older age groups.

Many other research studies have shown that loud noise impairs concentration, creativity, and and the ability to learn. There's an increase in aggressiveness, cardiovascular disease, headaches, anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies.

The noxious effect is intensified when you can't turn the noise off. It's well known that both animals and humans react much worse to stress that is out of their control than they do to stress they know will soon end or which they can modify.

Given the general noisiness of humanity plus the appalling cacophony of technological civilization, the future looks noisier. Unless sanity takes over, there will be more and more people — and those people will be talking, yelling, singing and using loud equipment. And since so many of today's young people already have diminished hearing that will get worse as they get older, *they* will talk louder and play their sound equipment at stronger decibels.

Is there hope?

Much work is being done to help the hearing disabled, and to provide auditory protection for those who must be exposed to loud sounds, but not enough people take advantage of the knowledge and the protection. Ear plugs should be required for noisy jobs, but as I walk by with my fingers in my aging ears, I notice that most of the people jack-hammering Manhattan streets are doing it without wearing ear protection.

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There are techniques for home, apartment, and office construction that diminish sound from without and within, yet many a tenant of a new building has discovered that yelling, or even just a bass beat from next door is keeping him from working or sleeping.

It's said that almost 2 million American factory workers are exposed to noise over 85 decibels, which is not only deadly but inexcusable. Factory equipment, vehicles, etc. can be — and have been — engineered to run more quietly, mainly by stopping structural vibrations caused by parts or air in motion.

To stop vibrations and also absorb noise there are now better materials and more on the way, like composite coatings and film that could make "acoustic wallpaper." [I want some *now*.]

Computers run more quietly than typewriters, so that's a plus for some of us. Computers can also run their still stupid relatives, the robots — and it's the robots that should be doing the work that damages human auditory hair cells.

I am intrigued by the prospect of ANC, or active noise control. A sound is detected and analyzed. Then an identical sound in a different phase is used to block the first.

At England's Southampton University's Institute for Sound and Vibration Research, Steve Elliott has worked on ANC using highly sophisticated electronic control mechanisms that can analyze the mixture of sounds in a particular noise (like that from airplane motors) and predict how the sound will immediately change — making it possible for the blocking sounds to keep up with the incoming noise.

Noise Cancellation Technologies in Connecticut has been developing ANC headphones that may be able to adapt to the everchanging quality and quantity of street noise.

Cars could be (some already are) produced that contain antinoise systems, installed so that the "antinoise" comes from the car's loudspeakers. "Intelligent buildings" will have surfaces that actively respond to and cancel out incoming noise.

Some rock bands are playing softer, not only to preserve their own hearing, but to show their skill (extreme loudness can obscure inept playing and badly tuned instruments). We don't want to do without music.

45 years ago, Carroll C. Pratt (then of Princeton University) said that without intervening words and signs music conveys to the listener the inner life — "Music sounds the way emotions feel."

We can at least hope for a quieter future, one in which our marvelous human need and talent for music will not be disrupted by hearing loss.

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As this issue goes to print, Nina Kiriki Hoffman's popular story from our January 1995 issue, "Home for Christmas," sits atop the preliminary Nebula ballot. She has had a good year. Her novel, The Silent Strength of Stones, *has received critical acclaim, and at the end of 1995, she sold two more books.*

Many of Nina's characters recur in her work. Tasha and Terry, the twins in this self-contained novella, also appear in two delightful novels (which are among the handful of books Nina has in her office awaiting rewrites). "Airborn" also inspired our beautiful Bob Eggleton cover.

Airborn

By Nina Kiriki Hoffman

IF I HAD TO PICK MY FAVORITE way of going home, I wouldn't choose the one I was traveling now. It would be more fun to come home for Christmas — where I could look forward to spending time with my twin sister and my parents, and the emotional atmosphere would be hey, let's have fun, let's do all the traditional things and enjoy each others' company. And afterward I could leave again, heading back to my own place.

Not like now. Scooting up Oregon back roads in my tiny antique Honda, I had most of my independence squirreled around me; my clarinet case bumped my heels whenever I took my feet off the pedals. I was going home in half-defeat. I had moved away from home at seventeen, finding an apartment in Spores Ferry, a major town an hour away from the small town of Atwell where I grew up. I wasn't even eighteen yet, and I had to move back to my parents' house.

I had made a promise to the powers of air that I would learn about them and become their disciple if they helped me through something I couldn't

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have survived myself, and they had delivered. The teacher I needed lived in Atwell.

So: I was on my way home, on my way back to school.

Cultivated fields spread out from the road, their green skirts bordered by woods. I slowed at the top of Sourgrass Hill to look at the Crooks Farm produce stand. It was autumn, and fruits and vegetables were ripe. Maybe I should bring Mom some apples as a hostess gift. It would reinforce my guest status in the house where I had grown up, be a pledge that I planned a visit, not a lifetime.

A man stood beside the road, his thumb out. He wore moccasins, dusty leather pants, and a fringed leather jacket. A beat-up narrow-brimmed hat sat low on his head. His scraggly dark hair came down to his shoulders, and his face, as tanned as the leather he was wearing, made his pale green eyes look like lights at night. He stared at me and I heard a whisper of music in my mind, the faint squeal of a fiddle. I felt sparks traveling along my muscles. My hands gripped the steering wheel tighter, turned the wheel toward the man.

I shook my head, pulled myself together, and drove on, without stopping for apples or the hitchhiker. What had I been thinking? There was no room in the car. Besides, the guy gave me the creeps. He looked too much like a maniac from stories after lights-out at camp.

In the rear-view mirror I saw a big gold car pull over. The leather man climbed into the back without even speaking to the driver.

I picked up as much speed as I could. Whispers sounded around me, but I couldn't make out the words. If I had my air powers already, maybe I could have strengthened the voices so I would know what they were talking about.

The big gold car passed me on an uphill climb, and I saw those pale eyes in that dark face staring out the rear window at me. They burned their image into my mind so that I kept seeing them even after the car was out of sight over the hill.

Atwell hadn't changed since the spring, except the leaves on the maples along Main had grown bigger and turned a darker green, and the movie showing at the Cinemart was different.

When I reached my parents' street, everybody's cars were gone from the driveway of our white one-story house. Mom was probably clerking at the flower store where she worked; Dad worked nights at the local two-star

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restaurant, and might have been home at noon on a Saturday, but he wasn't; there were lots of places my twin sister Terry might be.

I got out the key I'd taken off my key ring for four months of freedom in Spores and unlocked the door.

The smells of burnt toast, fabric softener, and dust greeted me, whispering that there was no escape from home. Still standing on the front stoop, I closed the door, took a deep breath of outside air, and opened the door again, looking at our front hall. There was the occasional table with its stack of opened and discarded mail, and the coat rack so deep in coats it looked like a hugfest, with Terry's tennis racket peeking out between hems. Everybody's winter boots and duck shoes stood in an orderly line against the wall. Mom was preparing for the rains early. The skittery brown runner carpet lay there on the hardwood floor, waiting to slip out from under the unwary.

Carrying my purse and my clarinet, I stepped over the threshold. This didn't look like the house of a powerful witch (my sister) or even a halfway witch (me). I wondered if Mom and Dad had figured out about that yet. When Terry and I were cursed with witchcraft by a semi-benevolent ghost on our twelfth Halloween, we had agreed without even discussing it not to tell Mom and Dad. We practiced in private. When we found our mentor, Natalya Clayton, we told our parents we had joined Adopt-a-Grandmother to explain why we spent so much time at her house. We called Natalya Gran to help maintain the fiction. Our parents never even figured out Natalya was the principal of Atwell Middle School — they weren't big on PTA meetings or Open House or Family Night. Later, when we went out at night a lot, Mom and Dad didn't say much. But then, they had never kept a very close eye on us.

I went on through the kitchen, glancing at the stack of dirty dishes clustered around the sink. I checked my power reservoir. I had been practicing channeling lately, inviting power to come to me, welcoming it, storing it, taking it out to stroke so that we would get to know each other and work well together. A fraction of it, a little white dart of power, would clean those dishes and put them away.

On the other hand, I should start as I meant to go on; none of those dishes were mine. I went through the laundry room to the servants' quarters, two little rooms in the back of the house just big enough for a bed, bedside table, and a dresser each, with a shared closet in the middle. Terry had the right

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room, and I had the left. When we were little, we had borrowed each other's clothes until we didn't know what belonged to whom; by the time we reached ten, though, we had sorted ourselves out. She turned tomboy and I went Laura Ashley.

When I saw Terry two weeks before in Spores, she had changed again, wearing stylish clothes in strong single colors. Her short dark hair had been cut by a professional instead of by her standing in the bathroom and checking it out in the mirror as she went, or by me, same place, with her growling at me every time I tried something fancy. I still had long dark hair which I curled, and was still wearing ruffly things with little flowers all over them, and I felt stupid. When I saw kids my age on the street I felt like a visitor from another time. I felt I was ready for neon, but it was hard to redefine myself.

My room still had its orange and yellow butterfly kite hanging from the ceiling, its ribbon tail tacked in swirls across the wall. From the dust on my dresser, I could tell nobody had been in there since I left.

I put my clarinet and my purse on the dresser. I opened the window, which looked out on the back patio, Dad's rusty barbecue, the lawn, and the stained wood fence around the yard. I held my hands out, palms up, and said, "Powers of air, I welcome you. I invite you. Be with me in this place."

A breath of air blew across my palms.

"Thank you," I said. I sat on the bed, closed my eyes, and thought about my power reservoir. I released a tiny dart of power, instructing it to chase away the dirt and dust in the room and leave everything smelling like sunlight on morning grass. Unlike the dishes, my room was my responsibility. When I opened my eyes the room was cleaner than it had ever been before. The butterfly kite sparkled like sunrise above me.

"See, Tasha? That wasn't hard, was it?" said Terry from the threshold.

I jumped about a foot. "Where'd you come from?"

"I was studying in my room."

"But your car — "

" — is in the shop. Oil change. I thought you weren't getting in till about three."

"It didn't take as long to pack as I thought it would."

"Not if you only brought your clarinet," she said, and grinned. "Did your boyfriend help?"

"Not during the day."

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"I forgot."

I gripped one hand in the other, remembering saying goodbye to Danny in my Spores Ferry apartment just before dawn that morning. He had said, "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Yes," I told him.

A breeze had sneaked in and lifted a strand of my hair. I held up my hand and felt the spiral touch of a tiny whirlwind. "You see? Already I have friends."

He reached out and the whirlwind brushed his fingers. His eyebrows rose. "Well, okay," he said, "but I'm saving the apartment for you."

I hugged him hard. "Wherever I am, you're welcome," I said, letting formality touch my voice. I wanted to make it a binding invitation for both of us.

"Atwell may be out of my range."

"We have a nice dark basement."

"Heh," he said, his eyes laughing. Then he sat up. "The day is troubling my blood," he said. "I have to go." He kissed me, turned to mist, and flowed out my window, seeping down the side of the building and into his basement apartment, where he would sleep the sleep of death all day.

I had stood in the middle of my apartment after he left, thinking. At ten, I had been sure there was magic in the world, but I had never seen any. At eleven, I wasn't so sure anymore. At twelve, I had met that ghost..... After that, everything went wild. It was difficult for me to see the world as flat, understandable, predictable, the way I almost had at eleven. Now, every time I looked hard at anything, it turned surprising.

I had looked at Danny a lot.

Packing, I had taken only half my things. The apartment stayed mine; my landlord had told me so.

I had come home in half-defeat, half-victory, because I still had my own place, away from home.

"I'll help you unload the car," said Terry.

We went outside and fished things out of my car. "Oof," said Terry, scraping her side as she pulled a book box out from behind the seat. "This job could be a lot easier."

"Not if we want to maintain a low profile in this neighborhood," I said, lifting out my Rabbit Track Maranta plant by its hook. That was one of our teacher's basic principles: keep your craft quiet.

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Terry rubbed her side and smiled at me. "Just checking." She stacked one box on another and carried them into the house.

"Checking what?" I yelled after her.

One of our neighbors walked by, a golden retriever on a leash dragging him.

"Whether you're practicing your disciplines," Terry yelled back. I held the plant above the dog's nose range and patted him. The neighbor smiled at me and moved on.

Terry and I unloaded the rest of my things in silence. We put everything on the floor of my room except my plant and my suitcase. The plant went on top of my sparkling clean dresser with my clarinet, and the suitcase I set on my bed. I opened it. "Have you been keeping the craft quiet?" I asked my sister.

Terry sat on the bed beside my suitcase. "Very quiet. I barely do anything at home anymore. Mom and Dad have been looking at me sideways lately. They keep wondering why you left. I guess Dad's feeling guilty because he never saw it coming, but then, who did?"

I wasn't sure even I had seen it coming. It had surprised me when I decided to leave home. I had never done anything without Terry before. But I had awakened one morning in my little room thinking that as soon as I stepped out my bedroom door Terry would be on my case about how I wasn't practicing anything enough and did I want to be a halfway witch, what was wrong with me? The only place I felt comfortable and safe anymore was sleep.

And I had thought: I can go somewhere else. I can get away from this. I can.

Life spread out in front of me like a carrying sea, promising distances and treasures and places to go.

I went, and I was glad to go. It was the right thing to do.

I had to make coming back the right thing to do, too.

"So where do you practice?" I asked.

"I found a game trail that goes up the side of Owl Butte. For people without flashlights or nighteyes it's awfully hard to find after dark. I put a blur on it after I go up. It leads to a clearing halfway up the butte. I've put wards around the clearing — no sign anybody else has been using it in the past twenty years — and I work there. I'll take you tonight if you want."

"I'm not sure yet," I said, putting shirts, skirts, and dresses on hangers.

"Discipline," said Terry, nagging again already.

I frowned into the closet. I planned to be disciplined, but if she nagged me about it, I might, just to be perverse, resist. That wouldn't help me and my

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promise to air. Getting her to stop nagging would be hard, though; she had the habit. I shoved her clothes sideways on the bar in the closet, hung mine up, then collected myself and faced her. "I don't know what disciplines I'll be practicing yet. I have to see Gran."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a direction now," I said. "I've consecrated myself to the powers of air."

Terry frowned ferociously at me.

I emptied the rest of my suitcase's contents into dresser drawers, looked at my boxes, and sighed. "I think I want to go see Gran now," I said.

"I'll call," said Terry. She went to phone in the kitchen.

I studied myself in the mirror behind the plant on my dresser. My hair had wilted since the morning session with blow dryer and curling brush. I got a brush and an elastic band out of my purse, brushed my hair back, and fastened it into a ponytail. I studied the black eyeliner around my eyes. It brought out the blue, all right, but it made me look like I hadn't gotten enough sleep, which I hadn't. My skin was pale, which made my blusher stand out too much, and I'd fretted most of the lipstick off my lips.

I closed my eyes and called forth a tiny sliver of power, asking it to lift the makeup off my face. Heat kissed my cheeks, my eyes and mouth. I opened my eyes. Without eyeliner, mascara, and shadow, my eyes looked small and defenseless. I frowned with my pale lips, shook my head. Air probably wouldn't care what I looked like.

"She's expecting us — " Terry said from the door, then paused, her eyes widening.

"What?"

"I just haven't seen you naked like that in a long time." Terry never wore makeup. Her lashes and eyebrows were thicker and darker than mine, and she had more natural color.

We were identical. How could she have more of something? Maybe she disciplined her way into it?

"Well," I said, and shrugged. "Let's take my car."

Natalya Clayton lived in a big old house on the edge of town. It was painted slate blue and had a black roof and front porch, and all kinds of little gray knick-knacky bits here and there.

When we pulled up at Natalya's that Saturday afternoon, the house lay

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sleeping in the sun. The pre-settlement maple in Natalya's front yard towered above the house. Its leaves were still green; we were shy of the valley's first frost.

Natalya was in her front yard, spading up earth. She straightened when we got to the gate. Her black eyes were bright, and her silver hair, most of it in a bun, made a little haze around her head "Tasha, my dear," she said. She dropped her gardening gloves on the ground and came to hug me.

She was so small in my arms, warm as a bird, and strong. For a moment I hugged her with my eyes closed. When I opened them, I was looking toward the big maple, and I saw pale eyes looking back at me. "Oh!" I said, releasing Natalya.

"What?" she asked.

"The Leather Man," I said, peering toward the maple. He had been standing beside the trunk, but now he was gone.

Natalya frowned. "Where did you learn that name?"

"Is that a name? I saw a man all dressed in leather, hitchhiking."

Her eyes widened. "Where?"

"On Sourgrass Hill." I should have bought fruit for Natalya, too. An apple for the teacher. "I almost stopped for him, but there was no room in the car. And...he was just there, but now he's gone again."

She looked toward the tree a long considering moment, then at me. "Just as well," she said. "Tasha, you've changed. There's order in you."

"I hope you'll accept me as a pupil again. I'm ready to learn and apply myself now."

"Let's have tea," she said, which was how all our lessons started. She led us into the house.

"I think she's nuts," Terry told Natalya as we sipped hibiscus tea at the big brown table in the kitchen.

I took my last sip of tea and handed my cup to Natalya. She studied the leaves in the bottom. "No, she's correct," said Natalya. "She has been granted a boon, and she offers payment. All in alignment with the principles of order. Tasha, I don't know the special mysteries of the powers of air; I am a general practitioner. You must seek a guide."

"How many witches can there be in a town this size, Gran?"

"You might be surprised. But I'm not talking about a witch guide. You need a totem, an animal you can study and learn from. What you are proposing is one of the most severe disciplines possible — not the craft, more like the priesthood. It will offer you different gifts and satisfactions from the ones you

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could have received if you had followed the craft."

I felt a sinking sensation in my stomach. She made it sound like this was going to be so strict. I wasn't good at strict. I had agreed to do this on my own. Nobody had suggested it to me. I had never even heard of someone doing it, actually, dedicating themselves to serving a power instead of learning the power and making it serve them.

I took a couple of deep breaths and felt stronger. "Gosh," I said. "Sometimes I wish I was eleven again." When Terry and I were eleven, we had been normal. Mostly.

"Beware of wishes," said Natalya.

"What if I fail? What if I flunk? This sounds so hard, Gran."

She gave me her widest smile. "Yes, child. The best possible thing for you, I think. I had given up hope, but now I feel hope renewed."

"Will it take the rest of my life?"

She lifted an index finger. "Don't look so far ahead. First enhance your relationship with air. Then consult with it. A direction will come to you when you work with your element."

"How can I, uh, enhance my relationship with air?" I said, feeling like laughing and crying. What could you do with air? Breathe it, right? If you were lucky, you couldn't even see it.

"Meditate. Focus. Seek to commune with air."

"I'm out of practice," I said. I had never been good at sitting and waiting for something to happen, and I was even worse at sitting and waiting for nothing to happen.

"Well, don't whine about it. Get back in practice."

I felt defeated. "Okay," I said. "What do I do first?"

TERRY TOLD ME the whole thing was silly all the way back to our house. I drove without responding to her. The box of incense Natalya had given me lay in my skirt pocket against my thigh.

"Honestly, Tasha, give it up," said Terry as I parked the car in front of the house. "You don't have the discipline to — "

Shut up, I thought.

She choked and put her hand to her throat, then looked at me, her eyes wide. She struggled for breath.

No! I thought. *Forget that!*

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She pulled in deep gasping breaths. She got out of the car without saying anything else and headed up the walk, not glancing back.

I sat behind the wheel of my car, wondering whether I should get out at all or just drive away. How could I do that to her?

How could I? I didn't know how to do anything like that. Maybe she just choked or something.

She was strong in her craft, a serious practitioner, with style and class. She wouldn't just choke. She wouldn't allow herself to.

I got out of the car, slamming the door behind me, and followed my sister into the house. "What happened?" I yelled.

"Don't talk to me." She vanished into her room, slamming the door.

I went into my room and put the box of incense on top of my dresser. There wasn't a calm system in my body. I didn't think I was ready to lie down and meditate yet. I went back to the kitchen and washed dishes by hand instead. Too bad about setting precedents; sometimes you just needed to do housework. I searched through the fridge and the cupboards to see what there was for dinner, and put together a salad and a tuna casserole.

Mom walked in while I was setting the table. "Oh, baby," she said, coming to kiss the back of my neck, a favorite target of hers. "It's nice to come home to you."

"Honestly?"

"Oh, yes! I've missed you."

"You had the good twin at home."

"Don't be silly," said Mom. She put a handful of roses she'd brought home into a vase, grabbed a wedge of lettuce from the salad bowl and munched on it. "Terry's the bad twin. What have you got in the oven? It smells good." She went and peeked. "Yum," she said.

"Where's Dad been all day?"

"All day?" Mom glanced over her shoulder at me, her eyebrows drawing together above her nose. "He was going to do some shopping," she said, her voice vaguing out. "He wants to build some shelves for the living room."

"Well, I got here at noon and he wasn't here, and then Terry and I went out for a while. Maybe he came back and got ready for work and left again."

"Mmm, could be," said Mom. "When is it dinner?"

"Half an hour," I said. I put a towel over the salad and stored it in the fridge.

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"Is the bad twin home?"

"Uh huh. She's in her room."

"Are you fighting already?"

I looked at her, surprised.

"Well, if you guys were feeling good toward another, wouldn't you be working together, and talking twice as fast as a person can understand, the way you used to?"

"I guess we would," I said.

"What's the plan, now that you're back, anyway? Are you going to school? Would you get left back a grade, or just go on to senior year?"

"I only dropped out a month before the end of the semester," I said. "I don't really know." I wasn't sure how many hours a day my new discipline would take. It occurred to me that it wasn't something that would put food on the table, either, as far as I could tell. I would need other skills. "Maybe I should go back to school. Mom, do you use anything you learned in high school in your daily life?"

"Not the geometry or the algebra," she said, getting out some crackers. "History, English, science, occasionally a little French, yes."

"Oh." Terry still had her half of the college money our grandmother had left us. I'd put a hole in mine, renting the apartment in Danny's building, and I should keep paying him rent if he was going to keep the apartment for me; otherwise that was lost revenue for him. If I finished high school this year, I could move back to Spores and go to college, for as long as I could afford to. Which, after another year's rent, might not be too long.

"Do you use anything you learned in college in daily life, Mom?"

"Yes," she said. She was slicing cheese.

"I need to make some money," I said.

"College can help you there, too," said Mom. "Have you figured out what kind of career you want?"

If air and I had an enhanced relationship — "Maybe I'll fly planes."

"Well, that certainly came out of the blue."

"Exactly," I said, grinning at her.

"Sit with me and tell me what's been happening with you," said Mom, putting a plate of crackers and cheese in the middle of the table. "Did you enjoy life in the big city?"

"Big city? Ha!"

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"Okay, but what did you do?"

"Not very much," I said. "I set up my apartment. I tried painting, but I'm lousy at it. I walked around and looked at things. I went to yard sales. I checked a lot of books out of the library and read them. I went swimming in the river. I went to the country fair and the county fair. I sat in on a couple of courtroom sessions." I helped my friends solve a murder mystery, but that didn't seem like something I should tell my mother. "I have a boyfriend. If he comes up to visit, can he stay in the basement?"

"Well, sure," said Mom. We had a guest room down there. It was damp and dark, but it had a bed and there was a half bath.

"Thanks, Mom. His name is Danny and he works nights and sleeps days."

"Works nights at what?"

"Motel clerk."

She blinked. "Well, that's nice," she said. She looked out the window over the sink for a little while, then turned to me. "So what happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"You had this undemanding bohemian lifestyle all arranged, and you can't have spent all your money yet, unless there's something you're not telling me. What happened to change your mind? What brings you home? Not that I'm not glad to have you, but I *am* curious."

"You've never been curious before."

She looked at me with narrowed eyes, then grimaced. "Indulge me."

"There's something I need to study and I thought I could only study it here. I'll help around the house. I'll be quiet at night. I just need to be here for a while. Is that okay?"

"I told you on the phone. It's fine for you to stay as long as you like. If you reach age thirty-five I may start charging rent. Never doubt your welcome, Tasha. I'll keep your room for you. I might park a guest there once in a while, but it'll stay yours."

"Thanks, Mom." I got up and hugged her. What she said touched me more than I had expected it to.

"For goodness' sake, you're not even technically an adult yet, Tash. And people in my family, we're often late bloomers — don't know what we're going to do with our lives until much later. I haven't settled on a career yet, and I'm thirty-eight. I mean, this is my seventh job in six years.... As long as

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I can afford to give you room, I'll do it." Her voice sank to a whisper. "Also, maybe you could figure out what's going on with Terry. She spends too much time in her room. Hugh's been calling her every evening, but she hasn't gone out with him in months."

"What? Jeeze! I thought they were the perfect couple."

"Something's burning," said Terry, standing in the doorway to the laundry room.

I let go of Mom and went to the oven. Only the edges of the casserole were too far gone to salvage. If Terry and I had been alone, we could have fixed it. If she hadn't mentioned anything, I could have fixed it before Mom noticed, or Terry could have. I wondered if she had said it out of spite.

"I guess it's dinner," I said to her.

"Good," she said, and sat down.

I put the casserole dish on a trivet on the table. The oven's timer began chiming. I glanced at the temperature setting, and it was right where it should have been. I turned the oven off, standing a little while with its heat moving up past my face, and thinking. Terry must have deliberately burned my casserole. Did she want to get back at me?

Maybe she needed an excuse to speak to me again after what had happened in the car. I had forgotten.

I sat at the table across from my sister. Her face was in neutral.

Mom dished up food for the three of us, the way she had when we were little. "How about a game of Ghost?" she said.

We made faces at her.

"Good enough," she said. "I'd rather you teamed up against me than sat there resenting each other."

"Oh, Mom," said Terry. She wrinkled her nose.

"I don't resent her," I said. "I just wish she'd stop telling me I'm silly and I have no discipline."

"I think that's her job," Mom said.

"Well, I'm firing her then." I turned to Terry. "You hear me?"

Terry nodded. "Besides, maybe I was wrong." She touched her throat.

Inside me I felt something that had been sitting there armed and poised to shoot relax. I took a big breath, and noticed —

The air tasted so strong. It carried the taste of burnt dinner and vinegar salad dressing and roses, and underneath that there was a power like cold fresh

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water. I drank the air, and its strength spread through me. I felt as if I had never breathed before. I stared wide-eyed across the table at my twin. She paused, a forkful of lettuce halfway to her mouth, and looked at me, then shook her head just the littlest bit.

I kept breathing, tasting air and dinner, the age of our house, the warmth of my mother and the many pollens she carried on her skin and clothes from working all day with flowers, ancient book dust Terry had brought into the kitchen on her fingers, the chill of white enamel from the sink, the heat still trickling from the oven, the ghosts of dirt that people had tracked into the house all year from their varied journeys, even my own dirt with a whiff of Spores Ferry and Danny's basement edging it.

"Aren't you going to eat anything?" Mom asked.

"I—" I said. "I'm not really hungry." Then I shook my head. That didn't make sense. I took a bite of salad. It didn't have very much taste — not after the banquet I'd been tasting on the air. Besides, my stomach felt full, even though I hadn't had anything to eat since breakfast aside from a few cookies at Gran's house. "Maybe I'll have some leftovers later," I said. Maybe my stomach would come to its senses. "Mom, what did you do today?"

She told us about the flowers she had put together for a wedding.

After dinner Terry volunteered to do the dishes and I went to my room. I closed and locked the door, then opened the window wide to the night and unlatched the screen. If I was going to have an animal teacher, I wanted it to be able to get to me.

I set a burning votive candle in a red glass on my bedside table. I put a brick of incense on a saucer and lit it, saying whatever came into my head, something like, "Air, I thank you for your gifts of safety, of food — " my stomach still hadn't growled, so I figured that somehow air had fed me — "of life. I offer you this scent and hope it pleases you. Now I offer you myself." I lay on my bed, my hands crossed over my stomach. I drew in deep draughts of air. "I don't know how to work with you," I murmured, closing my eyes. "I ask that you send me a teacher so that I can learn your mysteries and desires, the better to serve you. Grant me whatever it is right for me to have at this time."

I lay and breathed, tasting night grass and evergreens, car exhaust, somebody's barbecue, maple leaves, burning fields, river water. It was the

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meditation Natalya had suggested. Breathing. "Breathe in for a slow count of eight, hold it for a count of eight, and breathe out for a slow count of eight. Try to be conscious of how the air moves through you, in your blood, nourishing your body. Think thanks."

So I did that. At first I thought, this is taking a long time. Then I lost track of time, focused down on my breathing and counting. Presently I became aware of whispering voices near me, and a time after that I heard words they had probably been saying over and over. "Your totem is here," they whispered to me.

I opened heavy eyelids. Danny's face was just above mine, red light from the candle flickering across his features. He was smiling the gentlest smile I had ever seen. I lifted my hand and touched his lips.

"Missed you," he murmured against my hand.

For some reason I thought that was the most beautiful thing anybody had ever said to me. I lay and stared up at him for a while, feeling the strange unbreathing warmth of his face against my hand — he only drew in breath when he wanted to talk — and I started to notice something else about him, that air was mixing with his edges somehow, but before I could concentrate on that, I sat up, looking around, feeling alarmed. "Is there an animal here? Was there one when you came?"

"Just you," he said.

"I'm supposed to have a totem. Air told me." I glanced past him. In the red and white light of the candle all I saw was my kite, the thin gentle thread of smoke rising from the incense, and Danny, kneeling beside the bed.

He looked around too. "I'm not sure I understand."

I explained what Natalya had told me. "I'm supposed to study my totem and learn from it how to interact with the powers of air. Maybe it's a fly." I looked at the ceiling.

"I would know," he said. "There's nobody in the room but us. Although..." He glanced toward the closet. "Two doors away, somebody with a heat signature a lot like yours. Terry, I guess. And a couple rooms that way — " he pointed toward the laundry room and the kitchen beyond — "someone else, a woman."

I put my hand on his shoulder, took a deep breath, tasting. Listening. "Your totem is here," whispered the voices. Air sifted in and out of Danny's body as though he weren't really solid.

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"You're my totem," I said, and hugged Danny, who felt solid enough. "I get to study you! Finally, homework I like!"

"What?"

I let go of him and looked around. "What if he doesn't want to be my totem?" I asked the air.

The whispers had died away.

"Can I study you?" I asked Danny.

"Well. There are things about me I'd rather you didn't know."

"But those things don't have anything to do with air, right?"

"I don't even breathe most of the time. I think you got a bum steer. I've never been certain there was anything to this to begin with, Tash."

I didn't want to convince him the way I had convinced Terry. Come to think, that wouldn't work anyway. I took three deep breaths, trying to taste an answer. Danny had a spicy flavor, like dusty sage and moonlight. I could feel the strength of the air flowing through me, traveling all the roads of my blood. Air wrapped around me like armor, invisible but strong.

I lifted my hand, bending it back so that the inside of my wrist crowned. "Have you eaten yet?" I asked.

"Have you?"

"Uh huh." I had feasted on air, and I knew the taste of it was in my blood.

He sat beside me on the bed and lifted my wrist to his mouth. His lips were soft and warm against my skin. I didn't even feel the nip that broke the skin, but I felt his tongue tasting me, and the warmth of my bloodflow. I closed my eyes and relaxed, all my attention focused on the give-and-take. It felt good.

Terry couldn't understand this. She hated it. I didn't know how to explain. Such a hazy cloud of stigmata surrounded this kind of exchange; I couldn't fight my way past all the words. I just knew inside that it was all right.

Soon — much sooner than other times we had shared blood — Danny stopped and pressed his fingers against the little wound, halting the flow of blood his saliva had freed. "Tash," he said in a hushed voice, "it's so strong. It's so rich. It's enough. What happened?"

"It's air," I said. "Do you understand?"

"No," he said, "but I believe you now."

We sat in the flickering light a little longer, his arm around my shoulders, my hand gripping his, me breathing — feeling the air support me, driving out

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the lassitude I usually felt after sharing blood with Danny — and he silent. At last he took a breath and said, "I feel weird."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just weird." He turned his head. "The woman is coming."

I switched on the light on my bedside table. We both blinked. I blew out the candle. "Tasha?" said Mom's voice outside the door. "I thought I heard voices?"

I slipped out of Danny's arm and went to unlock the door and let her in. "Mom, this is Danny, my boyfriend I told you about."

"Oh, my," she said.

He stood up, pushed his heavy dark hair back of his shoulders, and smiled at her.

"Danny, my mom, Rebecca Dane."

Danny rubbed his hand on his black jeans and held it out. Mom shook it. "Please," said Mom, and swallowed, "call me Becky."

Mom had never had that nickname before. This was spooky. I imagined seeing Danny with Mom's eyes, and realized he was a little overwhelming, pale-skinned and beautiful, wiry and intense. He had told me once he thought high-voltage charm was part of the whole vampire package; they needed it to survive. It had stopped hitting me so hard, maybe since he knew I wasn't a threat, and he didn't have to charm me into feeding him.

"And it's nice of you to come visit," said Mom, swallowing again, "but I would appreciate it if you'd use the front door in the future."

"Okay," he said. "Nice to meet you, Becky."

Terry, rubbing her eyes, wandered in behind Mom. "Danny," she said. "Hi."

"Hi, Terry."

"This is meditation?" Terry asked me.

"Danny's my totem."

"Oh, boy," said Terry, "I wish I could dream up a scheme like that."

"What?" said Mom. "Terry, you know Danny?"

"Sure. I met him when I went down to Spores to visit Tasha a couple weeks ago."

"What does 'totem' mean?" Mom asked me.

"Danny's going to help me study," I said.

"That's not what I asked, Tash. Is this some new high school way of referring to something parents aren't supposed to know? What does 'totem' mean?"

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"He's, like, my spirit guide in my study. In my quest."

"I don't like the sound of this," Mom said. She glanced at Danny, who was looking at me, eyebrows up.

"Mom, why are you being such a parent?" asked Terry. "I mean, why now? You never noticed anything we did before."

"Time I started, then." Mom's gaze flicked to Danny, then to me. "What, exactly, are you studying, Tash?"

"I'm studying air."

"Something you can't find in Spores?"

"Gran's helping me study it, and she lives here."

"And now Danny's helping you study it? And he lives...in Spores?"

"I'm confused too," I said.

Mom put her hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes. "Tash, does this have anything to do with drugs?"

"Absolutely nothing. Zip. Zero."

"Promise, cross your heart?"

"I promise." I made an X across my chest with an index finger.

"Is this going to hurt your health?"

I shook my head.

"I mean, you didn't eat your dinner."

"Yes, but I'm okay."

"You're not on methamplifiers that suppress your appetite?"

"Mom!"

"Why would you want to study air? Why would you need a spirit guide to study air? Are you trying to put something over on me?"

I drew in breath, trying to taste answers. Somebody else's cooking was on the air. Danny stepped forward, touched my shoulder, looked past all of us toward the kitchen.

"Where is everybody?" asked Dad's voice from the kitchen.

"Out here," Terry called.

He was untying his bow-tie as he came into my room, which already had too many people in it.

"Tasha?" Dad said, blinking at me. "This is a surprise!"

"Hi, Dad," I said.

He eeled past Mom and Terry and gave me a hug. He smelled like heavily garlicked spaghetti sauce, and pepperoni; I savored the taste the air carried,

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felt it filling me again. I realized Danny had backed away from both of us. I looked over my shoulder at him. He pinched his nose.

Garlic, I thought. Powers of air. Can I take a scent out of me instead of taking it in? I took a deep breath, counting eight as I drew in air. I held it for awhile, imagining all the molecules of garlic gathering in it, and then I released it, a slow count, toward my wall and away from Danny.

"Are you okay?" Dad asked.

"Huh?" I felt garlic-free. I also felt ravenous. "Starving," I said. "Dad, this is my friend Danny, from Spores Ferry."

"Pleased to meet you, son," said Dad, holding out his hand. I thought about air deciding not to carry any garlic from Dad to Danny and watched them shake hands. Danny didn't even wince. I wasn't certain if that was because of my protection, or because his manners were too good for him to display discomfort. Dad said, "Why are you all having a pow-wow in Tasha's room? Wouldn't the kitchen make more sense?"

"Sure would," said Terry, yawning into the back of her hand.

My stomach growled. I thought about burnt leftover casserole or too-long dressed salad. Nope. A piece of bread, maybe. Toast.

I heard whispers riding the air, but there wasn't enough quiet for me to understand them. Mom, Terry, and Dad headed out the door. Danny gripped my shoulder. "What are you doing?" he whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"There are smells here, but they're avoiding me. I sensed the sulfur go into you and come out again."

"That's better, isn't it? You don't like it."

"What makes you think you need a guide on this quest? You seem to be handling everything just fine."

I turned and put my arms around him. "No," I whispered, "no, I've barely begun. I don't know what air wants from me yet. You must have something to teach me, too."

"Okay," he murmured, hugging me back. Then, "Your parents don't know about you and Terry?"

"Not a clue," I muttered to his chest.

"Kind of complicates things, huh?"

"It never used to matter. They were so wrapped up in each other we could do anything we liked. Something must have happened."

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"Tasha!" Mom yelled from the kitchen.

We went out and joined the others. I found some pretzels before I sat down. I was hearing whispers still, but I wasn't calm enough to decipher them.

"Cocoa?" Dad asked me, then glanced at Mom, Terry, and Danny.

"None for me, thanks," said Danny.

"I'm up for some," Terry said, and Mom nodded. I sat at the table eating pretzels and wondering when we could go to bed. The big question in my brain was whether Mom was going to pursue her uncharacteristic line of questioning. I had already told her the truth. I wondered whether I should come up with plausible-sounding lies instead.

"Danny, will you be spending the night?" Mom asked.

Dad, at the stove, turned and stared at her.

"It's a long drive back to Spores, and we do have a guest room in the basement," Mom continued.

"Tasha mentioned it. I think I had better go home tonight. Gotta work tomorrow night, and I need my rest in a familiar place. Right now I'm wide awake, though; these are my normal hours. I'll be fine to drive."

"In what way could you be a spirit guide for Tasha?" Mom said, puncturing my suspense about whether she was going to grill us anymore.

"I'm not sure. Maybe it has something to do with flying. Or weather. Those are the only subjects I can think of that I could help her with."

"What's spiritual about that?"

"I don't know." He glanced at me. "There's a lot we don't know yet."

Dad said, "For heaven's sake, Rebecca, why don't you ask them meaningful questions? Are you kids using protection?"

"Dad!" I yelled.

Terry almost fell out of her chair laughing. She laughed so hard she ended up coughing.

Dad stared at Danny right across Terry's laughter.

"We haven't exactly," Danny said, "gotten that far."

"Don't kid a kidder, son. I'm not blind."

Danny frowned and looked at me. I put down my pretzel and pulled in breath. Something had happened in the room, chasing all the taste of champagne bubble lightness out of it, cranking up the tension. "I promise you we're protected, Dad," I said, wondering if the metal edge of unease was just from parents who didn't want to think of their kids as sexual beings or from

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something else. I glanced at Mom. She tasted of the gentle salt of tears. I licked the air again, and got another faint taste from Dad, under all his own scents of Italian cookery, aftershave, flesh, fabric — a whisper of perfume, not Mom's. Protection — against what? I turned and stared into Danny's eyes. "I want to go home," I whispered.

Under the table, he took my hand.

Terry's laughter finally stopped. She jumped up and got herself a glass of water, drinking it in smooth gulps to settle herself. "What happened?" she asked everybody.

It was so strange. Dad's betrayal lay on the table between us, and I knew, and Mom knew, and Dad knew, and even, I thought, Danny knew somehow, but nobody was going to say anything. We were going to pretend it wasn't there. I wasn't sure I would even tell Terry in private.

Whispers scraped at my awareness. In the silence following Terry's question I breathed carefully, keeping count, and listened to the whispers. "Everything can be encompassed," they said.

I wanted to tell them to shut up, to choke on it, because I was sitting here with my heart laid open by a dull blade and I wasn't going to detour around that fact.

"Everything can be encompassed," they said again.

I lost control of my breathing, heard my breath hissing in and out of my nose. Anger was a red ball of fire lodged just below my throat.

So they had never been the most attentive parents. That had worked out all right for Terry and me. At least we could watch them being in love with each other. How dare Dad mess up what we had, even if it wasn't the best thing in the world?

Danny put his hand on my head. "Breathe it out," he said.

"What?" I gasped.

He tapped my chest just below my clavicle — right where my anger burned. "Breathe it out," he said.

I panted for a moment, then closed my eyes. I let out a very long breath, feeding the fire to it. I felt fire leave me, traveling on air. I felt like a dragon and wondered if I were scorching anything. When I drew in my next breath, it was full of cool strength. It flowed through me, calming me. Everything could be encompassed. Stupid but true.

"What was that a demonstration of?" Mom asked.

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"It's part of the study of air, Mom. Breathing. It's like therapy. This is sooooo weird," I said. "Thanks, Danny."

"You're welcome," he said, subdued.

"What? What?" Terry said, striding across to us and grabbing our shoulders. "What?"

"Her heat signature went nova," Danny said. He stood up, slipping out of Terry's grasp. "Tash, I have to go. I've got another free night Monday. I'll be back, if you don't come down to Spores. Good night, all." He kissed my forehead and slipped out of the room and the house.

"What does that mean, heat signature?" Mom asked. "What is this jargon? I had no idea I was so out of touch."

"I'm going to bed," I said.

"Not before you give me some answers," Terry said, giving me her best wide-eyed glare.

I almost told her to shut up. Instead I put the pretzels back in the cupboard, brushed my teeth, went to my bedroom, lay down, and fell immediately asleep before she could terrorize me.

I WOKE IN THE morning just after sunrise and showered, then put on one of my favorite dresses, a stretchy material made into a tight bodice and a flared mid-calf-length skirt, with a jewel-cut neckline. It was less neutral than most of my other clothes, cream-colored with strong sprigs of purple flowers and green leaves. I brushed out my hair and let it hang. Then I grabbed the stuff that hung down in front, took scissors out of a drawer, and chopped off hair until I had bangs. After that I looked different — not Tasha, not Terry. I looked like somebody I didn't know yet. I decided that was good.

In the kitchen, Mom was drinking coffee. "Are you going to tell me what's really going on now?"

"I'm studying air," I said.

"Tash!" She hit the table with her fist, then winced. "Will you stop this nonsense and tell me what's actually happening to you?"

"But Mom — "

"Tell me something solid that makes sense."

"But Mom..." I sighed. "Do you want me to lie to you?"

"No, dammit!"

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"The truth is that I'm studying air. No lie."

"All right, *why* are you studying air?"

What could I tell her? Well, I was in terrible trouble and air saved my life? I'm entering the priesthood? Air is my god? "Mom," I said. I lifted a napkin from the holder in the middle of the table, and tore it into bits. "I can't really explain this. It goes back too far. But — " I threw the shreds of napkin up, and air held them. They swirled around and formed the pattern of a snowflake, then hung like washing on a line, rippling a little. "Air," I said. I held up my hand, and the litterbits fluttered down to rest on my palm. I closed my hand around them. I looked at my mother.

She had gone pale. Her eyes stared toward me, but they weren't focused on me.

"Mom?" I said.

After a moment she clicked back to herself. "How did — what did — what — was that a trick?"

I bit my lower lip.

"How could you possibly set up a trick like that?" She held out her hand. "Give me those."

I shook my head. "I will never defy the magician's creed and reveal my secrets."

"So you're actually studying magic?"

I took a deep breath, tasted it, let it out. "Yes," I said. She meant magic tricks, and I meant magic, the real thing. I thought that was probably the best way to leave it.

"Why didn't you say so?"

"Well, it's air magic. It's studying how air works, learning to work with it."

"I feel so relieved," she said. "This is much better than all the awful things I was imagining. But I still don't understand." She sipped coffee and studied me. I got out some cereal and ate. Since last night I hadn't figured out how to eat air again, and I thought maybe it was a good idea for me to eat food in front of Mom, who had enough to worry about.

"Would you like to go to church with me?" Mom asked when I was almost done with my Cheerios.

I was going to say no, but a wind ruffled my bangs. "Okay," I said. I hadn't been to church in years. Maybe it would all be different. Maybe the air in a church would have something to teach me.

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I stood next to my mother, breathing deep, tasting body scents, perfumes, oiled wood, and candle wax. The stained glass cast colored light across everybody, a random patch of magenta here, orange there, lime green on the back of someone else's head. I felt the air spinning in my chest, and I waited.

The organ played four measures of a hymn. Throats opened all around me, and voices emerged. I gripped the pew-back in front of me. The excitation of the air! The blending of purpose, the harmony and resonance...even with six or eight people off key. "Immortal, invisible, God only wise," people sang. My mother held the hymnal out and nudged my shoulder. I lifted my voice too, feeling a strange and painful blossoming of beauty in my chest. Air entered me, left me, carrying song with it, my song mixing with everybody else's, coloring the air, so that when I breathed in again the air carried a strange sustenance. I wanted the hymn to last forever.

I felt light and ripply. The music stroked me inside and out. My feet left the floor. I tightened my grip on the pew and forced my feet down.

The music cut off with an Amen and my weight settled on me again.

None of the other hymns during the service affected me in quite the same way as that first one, but they each had their own flavor, and each took me out of myself. One of them tasted like thick cold wintergreen syrup and actually made me cough. I tried holding my breath till the end.

While Mom went up for Communion, I stayed in our pew, kneeling and thinking. All morning I had been keeping my mind from thinking about Dad and what had happened the night before. Now I let myself know.

When I had called to ask if I could come back and stay at the house for a while, I had talked to Mom, assuming she would tell Dad — they were so close they shared everything; they told each other everything they had done during the day, even if it was the same as what had happened the day before. Terry and I had always felt like interruptions in their twoness, so we were glad we had each other.

Dad had been out yesterday afternoon, and he had been surprised to see me when he came home after work. So: Mom hadn't told him I was coming back.

Dad had smelled like some other woman, and Mom had been crying.

Mom said Terry was acting strange.

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Was everything at home falling apart?

I noticed that my breathing had gotten shorter, and I slowed it. There was a strange taste to the air as people came back from the Communion railing and sat down to pray — a shift in body chemistry, almost a smell of sleep. Maybe just a sense of calm, mixed with the faint flavor of Communion wine. I breathed in the calmness. Everything could be encompassed. That was easy for air to say. Air was everywhere. Of course it could encompass everything. Surround, invade, possess. I felt the fire of anger sparking in my chest again. I sighed, and breathed it out.

Mom came back and knelt beside me.

The recessional at the end of the service was full of buoyancy.

On the walk home, Mom said, "I think I like your boyfriend. Whatever your relationship consists of." After half a block, she said, "How on earth did you meet the night clerk of a hotel?"

"He's also my landlord."

"Hmm," said Mom. "Convenient."

"It is kind of convenient, actually. Only...I don't know what kind of relationship we have. It's strange. We never say anything about love. I just like to spend time with him."

"Maybe that's a good place to stay for a while," said Mom, and sighed.

We walked in silence for a block. "Mom," I said. "What's happening with you and Dad?"

She just shook her head.

The phone was ringing when we got back to the house. I picked up the extension in the living room. "Hello?" I said.

"This is Hugh," said Terry's boyfriend, his voice desperate. "Will you meet me? Please?"

"Sure," I said. "Where?"

"The cemetery. Our favorite grave."

"When?"

"Now. Please."

"Okay," I said.

He hung up.

"Who was that?" asked Mom.

"Hugh," I said. "I'm meeting him in five minutes."

"You never identified yourself," said Mom.

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As twins, Terry and I had made it a policy to always let other people know which twin they were dealing with, unless we agreed to deceive. These days we didn't have to say anything to people who could see us. Our voices on the phone were the only things about us that were identical anymore.

I should have told Hugh. "He didn't ask."

"Not fair, Tash."

I shrugged. "He'll know the difference when I get there. I wonder which is Terry's favorite grave?" The cemetery wasn't big enough to get lost in, though it had graves from pioneer times on up to the present. "I'll be back in a little while."

She watched as I left the house. I could feel her gaze, but I didn't look back.

I was starting to feel hungry again. On the walk to the cemetery, I spoke to air. "You fed me yesterday. Can you teach me how? Is that okay for me to ask?"

I heard the faint weave of whispers around me, and I stopped, breathed, slowed myself until I could listen.

"Ask any time," the whispers said. "Open your mouth."

I leaned against a maple, hugged myself, closed my eyes, and opened my mouth. I breathed slowly and deeply, and tasted —

Crisp red fall apples, the coolness of the mountains where the leaves had already started to turn and ice formed on puddles, the browning edge of bread in the ovens of the bakery, fresh mint from the fields toward the central valley, Sunday dinners cooking in houses all over town, and the barest taste of fabric softener from the Laundromat by Safeway.

I asked the air to edit out the fabric softener, then breathed everything else down inside me until I felt full.

"Thanks," I said.

The whispers tumbled over each other. I couldn't make out the words, and not because I wasn't listening. This time they were telling me something I wasn't ready to hear; but I got the sense that somehow as they fed me, I was feeding them, so it worked out for all of us.

Hugh was sitting at the feet of a stone angel. When he saw me, his face lit up, only to damp down almost immediately. "Shoulda known," he said as I gathered my skirts and sat down beside him. "You agreed way too fast to see me."

His red hair was shorter than I remembered it. He looked paler than usual, with smudges under his green eyes. He had always been short — no

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taller than Terry and I, and we were five foot three—but, hunching in his sage green sweater, he looked diminished.

"Well, you asked me to come, and I wanted to find out what's going on," I said. "You don't look good."

"You remember that time when Terry went down inside herself and I went after her?"

It had happened when we were all fifteen, pretty soon after Terry and Hugh met. I nodded.

"Ever since then we've had this connection. I thought I was lucky. I only had to think about her, and I'd have some idea of where she was and what she was doing. We almost didn't need the phone to talk. I grew up alone, and I always dreamed of finding somebody to connect with like that, and it was great! Just absolutely great. I thought I was set for life."

"So?" I said.

"Lately, all I get is a lot of pain, and she won't even talk to me. Tasha...if this is how it's going to be, I need to ask her to cut the cord. I can't take much more of this."

I took his hand. "Come on, Hugh," I said. "Come home with me."

"Don't you think I've tried that? If I get anywhere near her, she slips off sideways. I can never catch up to her, even though I know where she is."

"Yes," I said, "but you're not me."

His eyebrows rose. "Right," he said, and we got up.

I pulled Hugh to a stop on our front stoop and tasted the air. He cocked his head. "She's home," he said.

"Keep her here," I whispered to air, "please." A breeze patted my cheek.

We went inside.

Dad was sitting at the kitchen table, reading a section of the paper and drinking coffee. He hadn't shaved yet, and he was in his bathrobe. He looked up at us and frowned as we walked through. "I forgot what it was like to have a full house," he said in a grumpy voice.

"Dad, it's almost one," I said. "Don't tell me I woke you up. I've been out of the house most of the morning."

He glared, then returned to his paper.

Hugh followed me through the laundry room, then hesitated outside Terry's door. We looked at each other. We both knew Terry was still inside. Hugh's face scrinched up, then relaxed. "She tried to bolt," he whispered.

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I touched the doorknob. The door opened from the other side. Terry, wide-eyed and pale, stood and stared at us. "What are you doing to me?" she asked me.

"What are you running away from?" I asked in return. I grabbed Hugh's hand and dragged him past Terry into her room, which was the mirror image of mine as far as furniture went. She had painted her walls and ceiling black, though, and stuck phosphorescent stars all over them. A realistic rubber bat hung from a string. The bed was covered with a navy-blue spread, and the rag rug on the floor was midnight blue. Hugh and I stood beside each other, glancing around. The decor was new since the last time either of us had been in her room, I guessed. I remembered the walls being papered with forest posters. "What is this?"

Stacks of old books stood by her bed, book marks sticking out like white tongues from between their pages.

"Research," she said.

"On what?" I said, hunching my shoulders. The air here was tainted by something I didn't recognize and didn't much like.

"On some topics Gran won't go into," said Terry.

"Ewww. Hugh...I'll be just the other side of the closet if you need me." I opened Terry's closet door.

"Don't go," he said.

"But — "

"This should only take a minute. Terry, either stick with me or cut me loose."

She went even paler. She looked like soap, with two sapphires inset for eyes. "Hugh," she said.

"I thought maybe this separation was temporary, that you'd get back to me when you were finished with whatever you're doing." He glanced around the room, then shoved his hands into his jean pockets. "But this looks permanent, and it hurts too much. I think you hurt too much. Either let me help you, or let me go."

"All right," she said. Her eyes were so wide white was visible all the way around the irises. Her mouth pinched shut. She held up her right hand, using her index and middle fingers like scissors, and cut the air between her and Hugh.

Both of them gasped. Hugh clapped his hands to his chest, breathing in jagged rasps. Terry didn't seem to be breathing at all.

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"Air," I said. I held out my hands to my sister and my friend, felt the air flowing like water across my palms. One stream went to each of them. I knew it carried strength and support and what healing air and I could offer. Gradually Hugh and Terry started breathing normally. Color touched their cheeks.

"Oh," said Hugh at last. "That hurt."

"You asked for it," Terry said.

"Yes. I'm starting to feel better now. What's wrong with you, Tere?"

"What do you care?"

"I love you," he said.

She stared at him, silent, for a long moment. A tear spilled down her cheek and vanished. "If you love me why did you want to cut me off?"

"Because you're killing me. What are you doing to yourself?"

She sniffled and touched a finger to the inner corner of her eye.

"You want me to leave?" I asked. "I hope you don't. I want to know what's going on, too."

"I don't ever want you to leave," Terry said, with considerable ferocity.

"What?" I faltered.

"How could you leave, anyway? How could you?"

"What are you talking about?"

"I wouldn't leave you," she said.

"This is about me?"

She stared at me, her lips thinning, then looked away. She held up scissor fingers and made a few half-hearted snips in the air.

"What?" I said. "What, what?"

"I'm the strong one. I know what I'm doing. How come you're the one who got away?"

"It surprised me too," I said. "But it wasn't that hard, once I got on the other side of it. You could do it. So what is this? Have you spent the months since I left miserating and hurting Hugh and not even telling me?"

"Not exactly," she said.

I sat on her bed and picked up one of the books on the floor.

"Hey!" she said.

I looked at the spine. The book was about necromancy.

"Ih!" I said, and threw it across the room. "No wonder it smells bad in here!" I picked up another book. It was about voodoo. I dropped it.

"Some of it works," said Terry.

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"Eww, Terry!"

"Don't be such a prude," said Terry.

Hugh picked up the book I had set down, glanced at the spine, opened it, and flipped through a few pages. "Huh," he said, "pictures." He showed me a picture of a voodoo doll.

"Air," I whispered, starting to feel afraid. The cool strength of air flowed into me, and I felt better. "What did you do?" I asked my sister.

"Well, you came home, didn't you?"

I breathed so deeply that my feet left the ground. The air was filtering out the taint in the room for me. I stood up, air under my feet. Now was not a good time to tell her I still had an apartment in Spores.

"You jab me with any pins and I will turn it back on you," I said.

"I didn't. I wouldn't. Not ever."

"Even after I choked you?"

"Thinking isn't doing," she said.

"Are you messing with Mom and Dad?"

"No."

"Good. Don't."

"Somebody ought to," she said.

"*No.*"

"Face it, Tash, they're screwing up somehow. You know how, don't you? That's what happened last night. You figured it out."

I spread my fingers, felt wind weaving between them. "Don't even think about it," I said. "I'm living my discipline now." I still didn't know what air would want to do with me when I reached alignment with it; from my association with it so far, I got the impression it would respect some of my wishes.

I glanced at Hugh. He set the voodoo book down. He looked much less haunted than he had at the feet of the stone angel in the cemetery. "It's starting to make sense," he said. "Terry. Let me know when you're done with this." He tapped the book. He walked to the door and let himself out.

"Everybody's a prude," said Terry. She twisted her fingers in a power gesture, and muttered some words in a language Natalya had taught us. "So tell me," she said. "What *is* going on with Mom and Dad?"

Air caught the powerflow from her hands and her mouth, and filtered it elsewhere before I breathed it in. "Don't push me," I said. The door blew open, and I slipped out of her room, still floating on air.

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* * *

"Show your dad the trick you showed me this morning," Mom said. "Tash is studying to be a magician, Austin."

Dad looked a little more agreeable. He had taken his shower, shaved, and gotten dressed, and he and Mom were sharing the paper and a late lunch.

I reached into my pocket for the napkin scraps. "Watch this," I said, and sprinkled the handful of scraps in the air. They darted around, then formed the snowflake pattern again and hung there, flickering. I grinned. I snapped my fingers and held out my hand, and the shreds gathered on my palm.

Dad stared, then blinked. "Do you know any other tricks, Tasha?" he said, his voice strained.

"I haven't worked anything else out yet. I'm still studying principles. If I figure out some other tricks, I'll show them to you."

"I'd like to see that one again."

"Okay." A cold finger touched the base of my spine. I looked up and saw my twin standing in the door to the laundry room. Oh, well. In for a penny, in for a pound. This time I made a couple of magic passes over the paper shreds, then dropped them. They spread into a different snowflake. I wondered if that was a mistake. I let them hover a little longer, then snapped at them and they jumped into my hand.

"How," said Dad, "did you do that?"

"Can't tell you."

"Did you know I had a magic act when I was a teenager? I actually played in clubs."

I had known, when I was little: I remembered Dad doing card tricks for me and Terry, and teaching us the magician's creed. But I had forgotten. "Maybe you can show me some of your stuff," I said. Air brushed the back of my neck, trying to blow down the hackles that had risen.

"I never had a trick to compare to that one," he said. "As one magician to another, can you tell me how it's done?"

I closed my hand around the paper scraps. "I'll make you a deal. A secret for a secret."

"All right," said Dad.

I drew in a deep breath, trying to taste my options. Everything had gotten so mixed up, with Terry practicing the arts that involved blood and death and controlling other people for her own wishes, and all the other cracks in the

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family picture. I didn't want to hurt Mom. Maybe it was time, though, to get things out in the open. That might hurt less than secrets.

Air had warmth riding it, a different strength from coolness. It entered me and touched me with relaxation. Whatever happened, I knew air would support me. "What's her name?" I said.

"Whose name?"

"The woman you were seeing yesterday."

In the silence, I could hear air whispers. Tiny warm breezes like fingers brushed up and down my arms.

I glanced toward Terry. She had her hand at her throat.

"Linda," said Dad. "How did you know?"

"Perfume. Not Mom's." I looked at Mom. I remembered kneeling next to her in church that morning. She had been praying; the air had told me about it, how the energy around her changed. It was part of the calmness that wasn't sleep.

Right now she looked still. Her hands clasped each other on the table in front of her. "Why, Austin?" she said. Her voice was steady.

"That's going to take some time, Becka." He ran his hands through his hair, then scrubbed his face. "No excuses, though. I did it. Tash, how did you do that paper trick?"

I was trembling. "Magic."

"That's no answer," said Dad.

"I'm not a magician, Mom. Dad. I'm a witch. Secret for a secret."

"Tasha," said Mom, and this time her voice was full of the pain it hadn't held when she had braced Dad.

I smiled, leaning against air, and opened my hands. Paper scraps startled up, tore into tinier bits, streamed in a spiral up and down, circled me as the warm-edged wind tangled my hair. The tiny white paper bits hovered above the table, forming a rayed sun, spun for a moment in the air, then drifted gently down onto the table. "I've been wanting to tell you for a while."

"Tasha," said Mom again, only this time her voice was half breath.

"Right now I'm studying air. I love air."

Dad collected some paper scraps in his hand. "Lift them," he said, holding his hand up.

A puff of air moved across his hand, collecting the paper, dancing it up and across the room. It snowed down on my hair, catching in the dark tangles like white feathers.

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"Terry, did you know this?" Mom asked.

"That Tasha is a witch? I knew."

"Is it — real?" Mom said.

"Yes," said Terry. "She's a witch. And I'm a witch."

"Oh," said Mom. She put her hands on her cheeks. "I feel so odd."

I went to her and laid my hands on her shoulders. "Breathe," I said, and asked the air to nourish and sustain her. She took some deep breaths.

Presently she said, "I feel better. I don't know why. How can you be witches? Your father and I never — " She looked around the kitchen as if searching for a cause. "Do you worship Satan?"

"Oh, no!" I said. "No. It's not like that at all. It's more — " I thought of offering flower dust to air. "A — an affinity for natural forces."

"Being able to talk to nature," Terry said, "and having it answer."

"That doesn't sound so bad," said Mom. "Maybe I'm a witch too, when I garden."

"Yes, Mom," I said, squeezing her shoulders a little. I released her and sat at the table.

"How did this happen?" Dad asked. "Were you born like this?" His voice carried an undertone of hope.

"No," said Terry. "Actually, this guy cast a spell on us when we were twelve, and it activated our — our witchliness."

"Could you cast a spell like that? All my life I've dreamed — "

"We aren't that sophisticated yet, Dad," Terry said.

"Oh," said Mom, her eyes looking up and to the right, "no discipline. Oh. Danny is your spirit guide. Oh. Oh, my. He's going to teach you to fly? What does that make him?"

"Someone more sophisticated," Terry said.

"Could *he* cast that spell?" Dad asked.

"Nope, he doesn't work that way," said Terry.

"What's a heat signature?" Mom demanded.

"Danny doesn't — " I began. "He sees a little differently from us."

"Oh, dear," said Mom. She sank back. "Oh, this rips the world open, twins. I feel like a baby. I don't know what's been going on here these last five years."

"A lot of stuff you don't know about that doesn't really change much," I said. "We're not on drugs, we don't worship the Devil, we don't turn people

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into toads. At least — " I frowned at Terry, and she giggled. I remembered, suddenly, the first time I had met Hugh — before Terry did. He insulted one of my best friends, and I turned him into a dog. That was back when I was young and confident, secure in my disciplines. I tried to remember the spell I had used. Back then it was right there when I needed it, uncomplicated: just words, very strong words, and no stage fright or hesitation on my part. When had I lost that confidence, and why?

Air whispered to me. I breathed and listened. "Never be afraid again," it said.

"What if I can't ask for what I need?" I murmured.

"We can hear inside your head," said the whispers, stroking my ears and neck.

"What was that?" Mom asked.

"I'm talking to the air."

"The air," she said. "The air."

"That's the element she picked to study," said Terry. "Personally I'd prefer something with a little more force, like water or fire."

"You talk to the air, and it talks back?" asked Mom.

"Yes." I grinned. "Oh, yes. At first I thought like Terry. What fun is air? But it's amazing, Mom! The music this morning was so powerful. There's so much I don't know yet! Air is the element that talks. And..." I pushed my chair back and stood up. "And..." Air slipped under my feet, held me around waist and shoulders, lifted me a foot above the floor. I laughed, holding out my arms. My hair rose around my head, and my skirt flared. "Danny's going to teach me how to do this and make it work."

I lowered my arms and sank to the floor.

"That worked just fine," said Terry.

"That worked...." Mom said. She put her hand over her breastbone. "Oh, Tash," she whispered.

Dad was just staring. At last he blinked. I felt strange. The happiness, the antigravity seeped away. I had never figured out what to expect once I told them I was a witch. I hadn't expected them to be scared.

"Terry, you can do that too?" Mom asked.

"Not that, but other things."

"Oh. Oh, twins," said Mom. "I need time to think."

"So do I," Dad said.

"We'll go away for a while," said Terry.

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"I want to call Gran," I said. Natalya would help me. Had telling our parents been a big mistake?

"Gran," said Mom. "Oh, no. Another piece of the puzzle. Gran. That sweet little old lady is a master witch. Look, Tasha. Here's my college education coming into play. It helped me master analysis of facts. Gran's been seeing a lot of you two for the past five years. Gran's supposed to help you study air. Oh, my."

"Looks like college does help," I said. "Keep taking deep breaths, Mom. The air is your friend." I headed for the living room extension and called Natalya. "I need you."

"All right," she said.

"And Gran, Terry — "

Air tugged a lock of my hair. I turned and saw Terry standing in the doorway to the living room.

"Yes?" said Gran. "Terry what?"

"Can Terry and I come over and talk to you?"

She sighed. "Of course."

I glanced at the VCR's clock. Nearly four-thirty in the afternoon. "I have to ask her, but I know *I* want to talk to you, anyway. I'll be right over."

I said good-bye and hung up. "Will you go to Gran's with me?"

"You're going to tell her about my studies if I don't, aren't you?"

"I will anyway. Your choice."

"What do you think? She's going to cast at me and switch me around inside until I'm a marshmallow?"

"That's more your style."

"I could do that to you first, so you can't tell her anything."

"Don't," I said.

"Stop me if you can."

She chanted at me, invoking twisters, adding gestures. The words were in the language of magic. I listened. The spell she laid out would soften me until I would be too nice to interfere in anything she chose to do. I would always be good and sweet and kind, and I would do every dirty dish I saw. She said the endword, added the finishing gesture, and cast the whole tapestry of command at me.

Air swallowed the spell. A second later I felt something small and square materialize in my pocket.

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"You would hate it if that had worked," I said.

She looked pale. It was a tough, effective spell, and she had put effort into it, only to see it disappear into nowhere. Or my pocket. She didn't know that, though.

"In fact, right now I could drop it on you. You know how ugly that would be? I would hate you like that."

"I just thought it would be fun to try for a while. I could always switch you back later."

"How do you know?"

She blew on her fingernails, buffed them on her chest, and smiled at me.

"Sure," I said. "Okay, you're good. I don't trust you to put me back together right, though."

Air tweaked a lock of my hair again. I glanced toward the kitchen. I wondered how long Mom had been standing there. "Mom?" I said.

She gave me a smile with a wobble in it. I went and hugged her, holding her until the stiffness melted and she embraced me in response. "I just keep breathing," she whispered.

"Good," I whispered back. "I love you." I wished I could protect her from everything, but I knew I couldn't.

"Your granny witch — she's a good person?" Mom asked.

"The best," I said. We had had Natalya over to supper a few times. She and Mom had discussed gardening and the language of flowers.

She let me go and stepped back. "So many things have happened, I feel like I don't know anybody anymore — not you, not Terry, not your father. Have I been walking around blind for so long? How?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry. I thought it was time to stop keeping secrets now."

"Yes," she said. She rubbed her eyes. "A little space will help, I think. I need to sit and think about all this."

"Come on, Gran's expecting us," said Terry from behind me. "Comb your hair, Tash. It's a mess."

I ducked into the front bathroom and studied myself. My hair was in tangles, snowed with napkin scraps. I pulled a comb through it. With air's help, there weren't any snarls, and my hair curled. I frowned. That shouldn't be happening. It was naturally flat, and I hadn't done any work with a blow dryer or curling iron. I looked less like any self I had known than ever. The blue in my eyes had darkened. I smiled at me and said, "Air."

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My curls twitched.

I put down the comb and joined Terry.

"My car this time," she said.

"How did you buy this car, anyway?" I asked when we were on our way. Terry had a nice white Fiat. "Your college money?"

"Lottery tickets," said Terry. She waggled her eyebrows at me.

"Jeeze! What a great idea!"

"You have to be subtle. I favor the small wins myself, because you don't need ID to pick up the money."

"I could make my rent."

"Rent?" she asked, staring at me with narrowed eyes.

I smiled at her. *Air,* I thought, *if there's a doll of me anywhere in her room, please find it and steal it for me. Please put it somewhere safe until I can dismantle it.*

Yes, whispered air.

Thanks.

Air stroked my cheek. I closed my eyes. *How can I ever repay you? I thought I was working my way out of debt, but I just keep asking for more things.*

Don't worry, whispered air. *Breathe.*

I breathed, slow and deep. It was weird. I tasted clean cool air coming in, and I tasted something else going out of me, warm and sweet.

Terry poked me. "Rent?" she said again.

"Rent," I said. "What about it?"

"What do you mean, rent?"

"On my apartment."

"It's still your apartment?"

"Mmm," I said.

"Damn!"

"If the dark arts worked perfectly, what would be the point? If you could pull my strings and make me do whatever you wanted me to do, why would you want me around at all? You could do it to anybody you liked or hated."

"The fun part is doing it to you," she said.

"Forget it."

"Tash," she said, despair in her voice, "I always knew we'd split up sometime. I just think now is too soon."

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"You've been getting too bossy and superior. You're too hard to live with. Besides, there's Danny — "

"What kind of future could a relationship like that have?"

"I'd like to find out," I said.

"Ih! You think *I'm* sick!"

"We've been driving around this block for five minutes," I said. "Will you get us to Gran's already?"

"Maybe not," she said.

I looked at her. The car got very quiet. It turned down Main. Terry jerked the steering wheel right and left without effect; we were riding on air.

"You're getting mean," Terry told me between clenched teeth. She pressed the gas pedal. The engine roared, to no avail.

"Me? I didn't do anything." I opened the door and slid out of the car. When I was safely on the sidewalk and had closed the door again, the car dropped to the asphalt. Terry still had her foot on the gas, and the car shot down the street.

I sucked air in between my teeth. If she was hurt —

She got the car turned around and parked. She was steaming when she climbed out.

Natalya stood by her gate, watching both of us.

Terry threw a rash of pimples at me.

"You're wasting your energy," I said, and went to kiss Natalya, who was smiling.

"Astonishing, Tasha," she said after we had greeted each other. "I've never before seen so much progress so fast."

"I'm not doing it. I mean, all I do is breathe, and I'd be doing that anyway, wouldn't I? Air does it."

"It takes two. You align, air aligns. It's beautiful to see."

"It's more fun than I ever imagined. Gran, my totem turned out to be my boyfriend!"

"How could that be?"

"Uh — " Would she think it was sick, the way Terry did? Air had picked him for me; it must be right. "He's a vampire."

She frowned. "I wasn't sure such things existed. I don't understand how this can aid you...I find this confusing, but I would like an introduction if the opportunity arises."

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"Of course." I glanced at Terry, who had joined me. "Gran, my sister is practicing dark arts."

"I know," said Natalya.

"On me."

"Better on you than someone else, Tasha. You have defenses."

I fished the spell from my pocket and handed it to Natalya. She exclaimed and dropped it. "What is that?" she cried, alarmed.

"Terry's plan for making me docile," I said. It was a small pink and powder-blue cube, and it lay on the ground, innocent as any pebble.

"How did you do that?" Terry asked, studying her handiwork transformed.

"Toxic," said Natalya, fanning the air in front of her face. "Terry, you're getting sloppy."

"I knew it wouldn't work."

"You did not!" I said.

Terry shrugged.

Natalya said, "Of course it would have worked. It's overkill, though, and dangerous. Terry, you know whatever you put out will return to you three times."

Terry shrugged. I held out my hand, and the cube rose to it. I tucked it back in my pocket.

"What are you going to do with it?" Terry asked me.

"I don't know yet. Maybe flush it down the toilet." Air tugged at my bangs, and I looked toward Natalya's house. Sitting on the porch swing was the Leather Man. This time I decided not to say anything to Natalya.

Who is that? I asked air. The Leather Man's green eyes stared into mine.

Ours, whispered air. *You and he will be together.*

"What?" I said, trembling. He looked so much like the nightmares of my childhood, the man who would come in the night to steal me away and do I knew not what to me, the man I had heard stories about on dark nights at sleepover parties. How could this be? How could air sanction my being with Danny, and tell me that this man was to be my — I didn't even know what.

"Tasha?" said Natalya. She touched my hand, then followed my gaze. The Leather Man's stare stayed on me. He faded like a shadow at the sun's touch.

"It just stopped being fun," I said in a wobbly voice.

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"What happened?" Terry asked.

"Did you see him?"

"The ghost? Sure. I've been seeing him for a couple years."

"He's going to be my — I don't know. Air says we'll be together. That's what air asks of me."

"Tasha," said Natalya. "Try to trust."

"But — " Air had saved me. I had given myself to air; air was taking care of me; and now air was giving me to someone else. For a moment I couldn't even breathe. Fear choked me. Desperation closed my throat.

Air pushed its way inside me. Soon I was breathing deeply without even trying. Breathing in cool strength, breathing out fear.

I closed my eyes and felt a tear track down my cheek. *All right,* I told air. *I'm sorry. Whatever you say.* I breathed out my resistance, letting it go.

Breathe and be you, air said.

Be me? Me is scared.

That's all right.

"Okay," I said aloud. "I'll try to trust." I touched the lump in my pocket. If I couldn't stand what happened to me, I could always break Terry's spell over my head. Whoever I turned into would acquiesce to anything.

"Let's have tea," said Natalya.

NATALYA POURED. She was using the Japanese service this time, glazed white porcelain with black characters on the pot, and small handleless white cups. The tea this time was dark and smoky-tasting.

I thought about all the questions I had for Natalya. What could I learn from Danny when he was already confused about it? What was I supposed to do about the Leather Man? Where was this discipline leading me? What about Terry, anyway? Maybe Natalya would just tell me to trust. Maybe she could tell me other things. "There's so much I don't understand. Where do I end up, Gran? Who do I turn into?"

"I don't know," said Natalya. "Truth to tell, I don't know anybody who's activated a relationship with an element quite the way you have, so I can't predict your future."

I breathed in cool calm and released more fear. The whispers were clear to me. *Whatever happens, we will keep you safe,* they said.

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What's your definition of safe?

Body, mind, and spirit nourished and growing.

I took another breath and tasted baking bread on it. I glanced around the kitchen, frowning. The oven was off.

Baking bread smelled like the safest thing I knew, with the anticipation of eating it hot and buttered soon after it came out of the oven.

I breathed again, and the taste was stronger, feeding me. One more breathful and I felt calm, ready to accept whatever happened.

"You keep zoning out," Terry said.

"I'm still here. I'm just talking to air."

"It's really annoying."

"Get used to it, Twin. The rest of my life I'll be doing it."

"You sure have switched over from yesterday."

"A lot has changed."

Terry looked at Natalya. In a voice edged with sadness, she said, "Gran. Dad was — Tash comes home, she looks at him, she figures it out. Dad was seeing some other woman yesterday. We don't even know what this means. Tash told Mom about that and the witching and then we left. It feels like everything could fall apart."

Natalya reached across the table and gripped Terry's hands. For a long moment none of us said anything. "The pieces will fall into new patterns," Natalya said at last. "Everything changes. Trying to lock something into one pattern when it's ready to change is a mistake. In the face of change, I will be here. You're always welcome."

"Are you saying — " Terry swiped at a tear. "No. It's not fair. What's magic for, anyway? If I plan right, I can fix it!"

"Terry," said Natalya.

"Tasha runs away, Hugh tells me to cut our bond — that hurt, Gran! — Mom and Dad — I can channel enough power. I know I can."

I wanted to jump up and tell her I'd block everything she wanted to do. It gave me the creeps. I breathed instead, and waited.

"How would you start?" Natalya said. There was no condemnation in her voice.

Terry gripped her hands. "A strong tether spell on Tasha. Not to her room, to the town. She could be herself and do anything she wanted. She'd just stay here. Hugh — I don't know what to do about Hugh. He said he'd come

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back if I gave up these other arts, but how can I handle this without these other arts? If I put a come-hither on him, though, he wouldn't be the same. I haven't figured out Hugh yet. If I could just wipe out Mom and Dad's memories of yesterday—maybe the whole weekend would be better. How can I do that, Gran?"

"I can't help you with that, my dear."

"Can't or won't?"

Natalya smiled. "For me to do it, I would have to violate my covenant with the powers that work with me, and if I break my covenant, I can't expect the powers to respond to me the way I want them to. Can't, Terry, and won't."

She had told us about her covenant before, in passing. She had never really explained it. She said a time would come when she'd need to tell us about it, but so far the time hadn't arrived.

"Then I'll just have to work it out with my books." Terry got up.

Natalya rose too. "Terry. I will always love you. You are choosing toward aligning yourself with powers I won't deal with. That might make it hard for you to visit me, because my house is warded against those powers. I said you are always welcome here, and you are, if you come without those powers. The choice is yours. Just now I want to say farewell." She put her arms around Terry.

Terry leaned forward and hugged her back, then pushed her away. "No. You're supposed to tell me it's wrong and I shouldn't do it."

"The choice is yours."

"No," said Terry, "that's not fair either. Dad never told us what to do, Mom never told us what to do, and now you won't tell us what to do. Most kids have grown-ups who tell them what to do, Gran. You used to tell us. It used to drive me nuts! You used to be so bossy, making us memorize that stuff, and learn those languages, and not try anything until you told us we were ready — "

"You're old enough now to decide what you want to learn and what you don't want."

"No," said Terry again. "I don't want to be that old." Her eyes were wild. "And I don't want Tasha to be that old, either. This air stuff. This apartment stuff. She's acting way too much like a grown-up. I — " She closed her hands, then opened them and worked her fingers, weaving something I had never seen before. Elements of it looked almost recognizable, a thread of water magic, a ripple of time, a pinch of green; but the other ingredients came from disciplines we had never learned from Natalya.

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Air lifted my hair, blowing it back, stroking cool along my cheeks. Wind touched me everywhere.

When Terry made her cut-off gesture and set her spell loose, it rose like green-gray smoke, hovered over us all for a moment, then drifted down toward her and me. The arm of the spell that reached for me blew away before it could touch me. Terry stood, hunched, watching the other arm. A finger reached for her face. She backed away. "No," she said. "If it doesn't work for both of us, I don't want it." It pursued her. She rounded the table and grabbed my arm. "Tash. Okay. I give up. Stop it, will you?"

I lifted a hand, not sure what air would do. It swallowed the spell the way it had the marshmallow one and compressed it, then handed it to me; I held a small golden disc shot with streaks of black and red in my hand. I put it in my pocket with the other spell.

"What was this one supposed to do?" I asked.

"Turn us into little kids."

"You are *nuts*," I said. Then I thought about it. When we were little kids, we were tight with each other. We went everywhere together, fearless, warriors. We explored, we crossed lines, we pushed boundaries. No magic. Bottomless curiosity. No supervision.

Something in me longed for that.

I took a deep breath. No. I was here now, my feet on the ground, air inside me, in the middle of the journey where all my choices had led me. It was time to take the next step.

"Did that spell come out of a book?" Natalya asked after a moment's silence.

"No. I just made it up."

Natalya went to the stationery drawer and got out some paper and a pen. "Please write it down before you lose it. It was beautiful, Terry. The combination of elements — inspired."

"But Gran — " Terry looked at Natalya, then shook her head and sat down, accepting pen and paper. She frowned at her hand, tried to frame the gestures she had used, then write them down. "Gran," she said, after working at it. "I forget."

"Invoke your discipline," said Natalya.

Terry glared at her a moment with narrowed eyes, then went back to work.

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"Didn't that use powers you wouldn't use?" I asked Natalya.

Natalya got down some almond biscotti and put them on a plate, set the plate on the table. "Perhaps," she said. "Many people do. Still, it's something that should be saved."

Terry ate a biscotto and frowned at her hand some more. I was still full of aerial bread.

"So, what are we going to do about Mom and Dad?" Terry said in a low voice when we had finished our tea.

Natalya looked into her teacup. "Tell them you're upset, ask them how they feel, whether there are new plans. That's my advice."

"And your advice is to leave Tasha alone, right?"

"The choice is yours."

"And Hugh?"

"What did he say?"

"He said he loved me, and I should call him when I give up the dark arts."

"Well, that sounds clear to me. Anything else?"

"No," said Terry. She looked at the page she had written, crossed something out, added something in, then put down the pen.

"All right. Go home. It's suppertime. Maybe you and your parents can sort a few things out." Natalya patted Terry's shoulder. "The choice is always yours," she said. "and the consequences of your choices — those are yours too. I love you no matter what. Remember that if you continue to follow the dark paths, it will be harder for us to see each other."

"Okay," said Terry. She folded up the guidelines to her spell and shoved them into her pocket.

"Also remember that you're inspired. You have a gift. Whichever direction you choose, you're going to be very good, as long as you maintain discipline."

"Okay. Thanks," said Terry gruffly.

"What about me?" I asked.

"You'll be fine. I don't know that there's anything more for me to teach you."

On the drive home, Terry said, "Maybe just a little stardust."

I didn't say anything.

"You know, sprinkle it on Mom and Dad, they look at each other, they're in love; whatever's past is past. That wouldn't hurt anybody, would it?"

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"I don't know," I said. "It wouldn't tell us why."

"I mean, it's not the end of the world. Other guys cheat. Maybe Mom did something like that too. Maybe they're just bored. Maybe they'll get a divorce. Almost everybody we know has divorced parents. Why should ours be different?"

"You're OBAH," I said, which was shorthand for Obsessing Before Anything Happens.

"Yeah, sure, okay," she said, and we spent the rest of the drive in silence.

Terry parked her car behind Mom's maroon Ghia and we walked into the house, wondering. I breathed deep, searching the air for hints. Lemon chicken, cooking in the oven; the ammonia aftertaste of loud voices; a chili scent of tempers held just short of breaking, and a faint caraway-seed taste of hope. I took Terry's hand and walked into the kitchen.

Our parents were sitting at the table playing rummy. "So," said Dad, "did you get everything squared away?"

"Did you?" Terry asked.

"No," said Mom. She picked up the card face up on the discard pile and dropped something else.

"Dad," Terry said. "Dad, how could you?"

He hunched his shoulders, then sighed and dropped his cards. "I've been over this with your mother," he said. "It feels complicated to me, but maybe it's not. I come home from work and everything is kind of locked up somehow. You're in your room doing stuff that worries me more now than it did before. Tasha is gone. Becka is tired. I go to work and there's no place for me to go — I'm a waiter, I don't know if I'll ever make maitre d'. Your mother and I are barely managing the house payments. They reassess the house higher every year and jack the property tax. We might have to sell, and then what? I lie in bed at night thinking about this after your mother is asleep, and I wake every morning with a sour taste in my mouth.

"So I'm at work. Linda's a cocktail waitress at the restaurant. She's young and beautiful and she gives me these looks. She says these inviting things. And I think...I think, anything for a little change or a little hope. So, finally, yesterday, I said yes."

He rubbed his hand across his mouth. "The irony of it is that what I was looking for was a little magic."

I felt as if something had struck my heart. If I had come home one day earlier...if I had talked to the parents about witchcraft a month ago, a year

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ago...if Terry had...if Mom had told Dad I was coming home in the middle day...if Terry had been out in the living room talking to Dad instead of back in her room reading...

" — and the truth of it is that I chose to take Linda up on an invitation," he said. "I didn't think I would get caught. I didn't think it would hurt anybody. I didn't sleep very well last night, though. It's better that it came out. The next move is your mother's."

"Well, you can stay for dinner," said Mom. "But I'm not sleeping with you."

"So I'm bunking on the living room couch. That's as squared as we've gotten it," Dad said.

"I want counseling, too," Mom said. "Both of us."

"I don't see how we can afford it."

"We can't afford not to."

Dad sighed. "All right. So, twins, what's next for you?"

Terry shrugged. "Study and discipline," she said.

"Discipline and study," I said.

"Tash, show me that napkin trick again," Dad said, "please."

I was mad at him — not an explosive anger that ran through me like fire, I knew air would smother an anger like that, but a quiet anger, low and steady, because he had put so much of what I loved at risk. I looked at him for a long moment, then sat down at the table, took a napkin, and shredded it. If it helped him and Mom accept what they now knew about me and Terry, it was a good thing to do.

After dinner, Terry and I stood in our back yard. The evening had cooled, and I had changed into my sneak clothes, black T-shirt, denim jacket, jeans, sneakers. We had left the back lights off, keeping the yard dark to give ourselves as much of an advantage as we could.

Tonight we had agreed to practice one of our basics, Rule Three: Gather as much information as possible."Since you left, I've been working on new skills," Terry said. "One is nightwalking invisibly. Watch this." She did three quick gestures, said one powerful word, and disappeared. "Neat, huh?"

"Terrif."

"What's the point if you can't actually use it?" said her voice from a head-high spot in the air. "I've been casing the whole neighborhood. Stand still. I'm going to turn you invisible, too."

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"Uh — " I said, looking down at my hands. They faded away. For the first time, air had let Terry land a spell on me.

"The tricky part is not bumping into anything. You have to think about all you body parts more than you usually would. When you can't see them, they get closer to a lot of stuff than you would have thought." Her hand crept into mine. "Come on."

Our invisible feet rustled on the grass. I felt very strange.

Terry stopped suddenly. "Wait a sec. Can you fly us? I haven't been able to get any aerial views of the neighborhood so far."

"I can't fly yet," I said. "Not really."

"I've seen you lift off the ground twice."

"Yes, but — " *Air, could you carry us?*

Terry's hand clamped on mine. We rose, the neighborhood dropping away from our feet, until we could see over our fence and most of the others on the block, into back yards. We looked down on roofs, on the crowns of trees, in through back windows. Barbecues and patio furniture sat abandoned. A hot tub steamed. A swingset sat still, robbed of the kinetic energy of children. Cats wandered fences, dogs barked, TV light flickered, people moved past windows.

I took some deep breaths, settling my surprise. "Now what?"

"Uh," said Terry. She sounded panicky. Not something I ever expected from my sister. She felt shaky, and her breathing was ragged. Maybe she was afraid of heights? Good grief!

Down, please, I thought, and air let us down gently on our back lawn.

Terry let out a whew.

A silvery mist seeped into the yard.

"Weird weather," said Terry, her voice still a little wobbly.

The mist agitated, as if stirred. I let go of Terry's hand and walked toward the mist and it collected itself around me. It coalesced and turned into Danny, his arms embracing me. "Your heat signature is here, but where's the rest of you?"

"I thought you had to work tonight."

"I traded shifts with Chet. I thought being a totem might be more important." He laid his hand on my cheek. "Tash, you smell strange."

I asked air to lift Terry's invisibility spell from me. It was odd. In the faint light of the city reflected from the clouds above, I saw my hair, my nose, and the upper edges of my cheeks appear, all the things I usually saw with peripheral vision but ignored.

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Danny touched my lips with gentle fingers, then bent and kissed me. I opened my mouth against his, breathing him in, sage and moonlight, warmth and no-longer-human flesh; I even tasted the strange viral undertone of his vampirism, bloodwarm and ironsweet, and the special chemical in his saliva that stopped blood from clotting while he fed. I noticed again that his edges weren't like live peoples'; air mixed more easily with him. I discovered that there were a thousand trace smells to him, faint notes, each a spectrum inside itself. What was this? His fingers tangled in my hair, pressed warmth against my skull.

"What, what?" he whispered presently, releasing me. "You taste like grass and bread and candle wax, dark tea and chicken and cookies, things I haven't tasted in so long."

"That's a catalog of some of the things I've done today. And you taste like — I can't figure it out."

"But I mean, it's different. It's not on your skin. It's inside you." His lips brushed mine again, his tongue flicking to taste me. "Oh!" he said. "Now I'm in there too."

Trembling started in my shoulders and spread. I leaned against Danny, shudders rippling through me. He held me.

"Air," I whispered.

In our service, all you need to do is breathe and be, whispered air. *Breathe and become.*

"Become what?"

Everything. Everything can be encompassed.

"I don't understand."

It is not important for you to understand.

I took three deep breaths. They contained a warmth and tenderness I had never tasted before. I breathed out fear. Tasting it on its way out of me, I sensed sterile dust. I let it go.

"What is it?" Danny whispered.

"I don't think I get it yet," I said. "It's scary." Fear was dust that choked me. I breathed again, and tasted night dewing the grass, and the body heat and complex scent-web of Danny, and Terry, who was somewhere near. I let the dust go. "Well, okay. I go beyond my fear. I gave myself to air. Air says all it asks of me is that I become everything."

He stroked my hair back from my face. "Ah," he said. "This is starting to make sense."

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"It is?"

"I don't need to teach you how to fly. You can get up and down by yourself already. It's about tasting."

"What do you mean?"

"Everyone I've ever tasted is inside me."

I pressed my cheek against his chest. "Everything I breathe becomes part of me."

"Yes," he whispered. "You know what that means?"

"What?"

"You can go out and pick the things you're going to breathe. Maybe you'll get around to everything eventually, but you might as well start with the things you enjoy."

"Is that what you do?"

"When I can." He reached for my hand, lifted my wrist to his lips. I breathed in night and woodsmoke, flooding my blood with flavored air. As we shared blood, I drew in breath, tasting leaves turning, suppers cooking, plants sliding into sleep in preparation for winter.

He pressed his fingers to my wrist. "Chili," he said.

"Tempers. It's been some kind of day."

He shook his head, smiling. "Will you be my totem?"

Breath caught in my throat, then flowed. "Yes," I said.

He laughed and let me go, then reached out and snagged something standing near us. "You want to go in?" he asked me. "I think we should go around to the front door if we do. I promised your mom."

"All right. I told them about us being witches today."

"Oh? What did you say about me?"

"Terry said you were more sophisticated."

"Very nice," he said to the air beside him.

"You're sick!" it responded. "You both are."

"Works for me," Danny said. Keeping a grip on her, he led the way around the house and through the side gate.

This time I packed the car more carefully, keeping the passenger seat empty. Leaving my plant in Mom and Dad's house helped. Terry said she'd bring it down on her next visit.

I had stowed Terry's two spells on the ledge below the speedometer,

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where I could reach them in a hurry.

I stopped at the stop sign on Main and stared at the town for a while, though there was no cross traffic to wait for.

Rexall Drugs, the Cinemart, True Value Hardware, the Blue Bird Cafe, David's Department Store, Woolworth's, with the dance school upstairs, Mountainview Tavern. I took some deep breaths, letting my hometown become a part of me. Overnight the maples had turned, summer's dark and ragged green gone to yellow-gold. A log truck rolled past me, streaming diesel fumes from the exhaust pipe near its cab, and I took a breath of that, too.

Then I drove through town.

At the stop sign where Main met the highway, the Leather Man stood. I pulled over to him and pushed the passenger door open, breathing in the taste of my possessions, breathing out fear. He climbed into the car, and I took my first breath of him. He tasted like the smoke of burning leaves.

My heart hammered. Air had told me this man and I would be together, and I didn't even know why.

He pulled the door shut and turned to look at me with his opalescent green eyes. I stared back, breathing. Breathing.

He lifted a dark calloused hand and touched my cheek. The breath I took then had a thousand flavors: Nepalese snow, Brazilian rainforest, Antarctic ice, Sahara sand, stone used to build an Indian temple a thousand years ago, needles from a bristlecone pine — each odor tagged so that I knew it without having ever tasted it before. "So you're to be my daughter?" he said, his voice as warm as sun on black granite.

"Am I?" I said.

"You've entered the service of air?"

"Yes."

"That's a fine thing," he said. "I've been in the service a hundred and thirty-two years. It's a life with a lot of travel in it; you get a taste for the distant places. In all my time, I never met another of us until now. Air told me about you. Last time I had a name, it was Pierre Chandler."

"Pierre," I said. "My name is Tasha, and it's all new to me."

He smiled, his teeth white in his dark face. "That's fine," he said, "That's just fine. I would admire to see somebody coming at this new. It's all so amazing, but you forget just how amazing once you get used to it. I would purely appreciate it if you and I could spend some time together, before the

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wanderlust catches up to me and I take off in search of someplace I ain't been yet."

"Air told me," I said. I swallowed. "Air told me you and I were going to be together."

He smiled at me and patted my hair. "That scared you, an old mossback like me, didn't it?"

After a moment, I nodded.

"You say me yea or nay, and I'll abide by your wishes."

Fear was just dust. I didn't need it anymore. "I would love to spend some time with you," I said.

"I'll show you some of my favorite secret places. There are woods here I ain't walked in years — gotta taste 'em and see how time has changed 'em."

"If we both go to the same places, aren't we duplicating our efforts?"

"It don't matter to air. It's everywhere anyways. I think it just likes having someone to talk to. Besides, you'll probably go off and breathe in space. Now, that'll be new — too new for me, I'm thinking. Separate or together, we're doing our job."

I smiled at him and put the car in gear. Together, we drove toward home.

I took another breath and tasted Canadian wilderness. No: home, like air, was everywhere. Together, we drove through home toward Spores Ferry.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

WE'VE DECIDED to turn our June issue into an experiment. The idea for this experiment happened when we bought a story from new writer **Matthew Wells**, and assigned the story a **Kent Bash** cover. Well, Kent's cover arrived in our offices and stunned the publisher, **Ed Ferman**. It also stunned our erstwhile film reviewer and guardian angel, **Harlan Ellison**, who saw the original in Kent's home. Both men called me, the in-the-dark editor, who didn't see the cover until much later, to rave about it. They decided, together, that no type should appear on this marvelous cover.

Somehow the idea of no type turned into our experiment. We decided to make June a new writer issue, which, by the way, guarantees that it will be one of our strongest issues of the year. You see, at a magazine like *F&SF*, which could fill the pages with name authors, a new writer must work three to four times harder than a well-known writer to "break in." These break-in stories are usually extremely strong, and extremely memorable, and sometimes, like **Isaac Asimov's** "Nightfall," the break-in stories become classics.

So our contents page for the June issue will have stories by **Matthew Wells**, and **Jacquelyn Hooper** and **Arinn Dembo**, names you probably don't recognize at all. Our hope is that when you look at our June, 1996 issue in June of 2010, you'll realize that all these names, once unknown, will then be among the most famous in the business.

Even if these new writers don't become the next **Gregory Benford** or **Harlan Ellison**, these stories will be among the most memorable you read all year.

In July, of course, we'll return to our regularly scheduled magazine. You'll find a stunning novella by **Jack Cady**, and hard sf from **Michael Cassutt**, as well as stories from other old favorites. In future issues, **Gene Wolfe**, **Carolyn Ives Gilman**, and **Sheila Finch** will provide award-caliber stories. So make certain your subscription's current. This is proving to be our best year yet.

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